やはり俺の青春ラブコメはまちがっている。

My youth romantic comedy is wrong as I expected.

渡 航【wataru watari】
illustration ぽんかん⑧

5
five

GAGAGA

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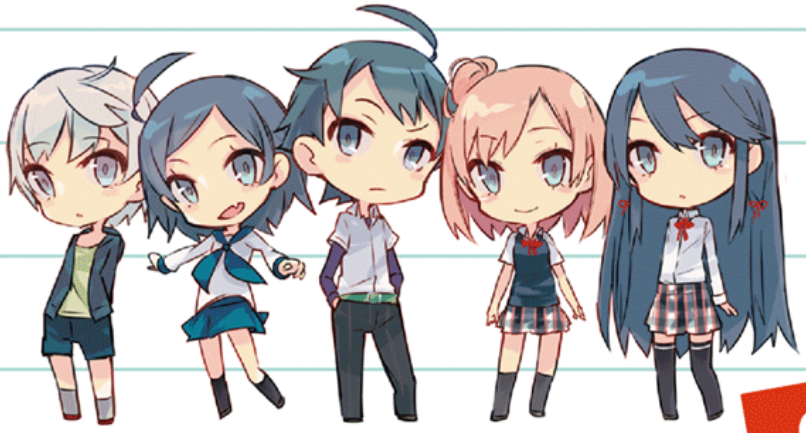

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家族旅行
summer vacation

「あ、うん、
旅行行ってる間、
ちょっとサブレを預かって
欲しいなーって」

由比ヶ浜結衣
yui yuigahama

My youth romantic comedy is wrong as I expected.

sable

yui
yuigahama

やはり俺の青春ラブコメはまちがっている。

My youth romantic comedy is wrong as I expected.

登場人物【character】

比企谷八幡……主人公。高二。性格がひねくれている。
【ひきがや－はちまん】

雪ノ下雪乃……奉仕部部長。完璧主義者。
【ゆきのした－ゆきの】

由比ヶ浜結衣……八幡のクラスメイト。周りの顔色を伺いがち。
【ゆいがはま－ゆい】

材木座義輝……オタク。ライトノベル作家志望。
【ざいもくざ－よしてる】

戸塚彩加……テニス部。とても可愛いが男子。
【とつか－さいか】

川崎沙希……八幡のクラスメイト。ちょっと不良っぽい。
【かわさき－さき】

平塚静……国語教師。生活指導担当。
【ひらつか－しずか】

比企谷小町……八幡の妹。中学生。
【ひきがや－こまち】

川崎大志……川崎沙希の弟。小町と同じ中学に通う。
【かわさき－たいし】

雪ノ下陽乃……雪乃の姉。大学生。
【ゆきのした－はるの】

カマクラ……比企谷家の飼い猫。
【かまくら】

サブレ……由比ヶ浜家の飼い犬。
【さぶれ】

design：numata rina

SUMMER VACATION ASSIGNMENT: RESEARCH PROJECT

THE WONDERS OF FIREWORKS

Hikigaya Komachi

WHEN WE SAY SUMMER, WE THINK OF FIREWORKS! ☆ FIREWORKS ARE REAL POPULAR IN CHIBA. THIS REPORT WILL DISCUSS THE WONDERS OF THOSE FIREWORKS.

1

◆WHY DO FIREWORKS HAVE COLOR TO THEM??

★A method called "flame reaction" is utilized to produce a colored flame.

2

◆WHAT'S A FLAME REACTION?

★A flame reaction is where alkali metal, alkali earth metal, and copper salts are thrown into a flame which produces colors specific to every metal. It's used in qualitative analysis of metals and the coloring of fireworks. Supposedly.

★But as long onii-chan's by my side, then my world is always full of color! Ah, that was so full of Komachi points just now!

3

◆DIFFERENT FLAME REACTIONS

★Below is a compilation of exemplary flame reactions. ☆

- Lithium - Carmine
- Sodium - Yellow
- Potassium - Lilac
- Calcium - Brick Red
- Strontium - Scarlet
- Barium - Apple Green
- Copper - Bluish-green

There's also sodium chloride; in other words, adding salt will produce a color, too! You can buy salt at a convenience store and if you use a card, you'll get points as well! Ah, that was just so full of Tsutaya points just now!

4

◆A WAY TO REMEMBER FLAME REACTIONS

★Flame reactions that'll show up on tests can easily be remembered with a song! You've got this in the bag!

- Lithium (Li) - Red
- Copper (Cu) - Green
- Barium (Ba) - Green
- Iron (Fe) - No flame reaction

LiRed~ ♪ CuGre is BaGre~ ♪

(REMARK) **"Feeeh... There's no flame reaction at all..."**

OVERALL SUMMARY

If you use flame reactions, you just might be able to figure out a mystery metal or the identity of a substance!

But if you look at it in another way, you can use Fireworks that utilize flame reactions to understand what the person you like could be thinking about or even their feelings! But the feelings of people who mess around at a Fireworks festival typically tend to be dirty, so you might be better off not knowing!

(REMARK) **"Hurry and explode! Phew! See you again, fireworks!**

Suddenly, the harmony of the Hikigaya household is destroyed.

I typed away at the keyboard on my laptop as I lay on the floor.

For the most part, I had finished the research project. Now it's just a matter of making it presentable and it was complete.With that being said, this research project wasn't mine. My high school's assignment was just a math workbook which I promptly got out of the way by copying down answers. No big deal, I was set on a private university for liberal arts, so math wasn't necessary.This research project wasn't mine, but Komachi's, my little sister.

As for the aforementioned person in question, she was laying next to me—recovering from her exam studying fatigue—and was raising our beloved cat Kamakura high up while squeezing his paws.

This brat… how could she be doing this when there's someone next to her slaving over her work right now…? Don't make me squeeze your paws![1]

Well, I did want her to concentrate on her exams, so I had to at least give her this much service. The pervading idea that there's no meaning unless you did something yourself was quite right, but common sense need not rear its head before my little sister.Morality and logic were nothing but a triviality, for the meaning of "little sister" was the combination of the meanings of "woman" and "the end".

In other words, the beginning and the future of women were little sisters and eventually, the end for all women. The Alpha and the Omega[2] as they say.

From origin to the end. It could very well be called the final form of evolution for all women. To stand at the summit of all women meant standing above all of mankind; there's no way I could go against an opponent like that. Henceforth, we established the Theory of Ultimate Little Sisters.

Therefore, I ended up doing half of Komachi's research project… "Therefore" what? Well, how about this then? Learning how to use people and culltivating personal connections that'd come to your aid was a form of studying as well.

As those thoughts swirled in my head, I hammered away at the keyboard and the idiotic, but pleasant report was complete.

—Now then, I just needed to add the name, "Hikigaya Komachi" to the report.

And lastly, "ENTER KEY, BAM!"[3] and saved the document. I pushed the laptop towards Komachi.

"There, it's done. Make sure to look it over."

"Mmmm." Komachi rolled on the floor towards my side.

Komachi looked at the screen, nodding her head, and then stopped.

---

[1] Don't make me squeeze your paws! – Parody of a lyric in Seikima-II's single "House of Wax"

[2] The Alpha and The Omega – A phrase in the New Testament

[3] ENTER KEY, BAM! – Parody of a line from Jigoku Misawa's manga

"….Onii-chan." Komachi slowly opened her mouth. Her voice this time was the deepest I had heard yet. It was deep, yet her smile was scary. "What ever could this be?"

"U-Um… I figured I'd write something very Komachi-like, so…" I frantically answered when she questioned me.

Komachi's shoulders trembled after hearing my answer. "Komachi-like… O-Onii-chan, that's how you've been seeing me all this time…? I'm so shocked! Absolutely shocked!"

She held her head with her hands and rolled around on the floor while groaning. I stayed there watching her for a moment due to how cute she was until she jumped up to her feet and pointed her finger at me. "How is this like me at all!? I mean, those last two sentences were totally you, onii-chan!"

Oh okay, I guess it was no good, after all… No, actually, even I thought I was pushing it. Wait, so the first half was relatively Komachi-like then, huh? That's more surprising to me.

"Fine, fine, I'll fix it. I just gotta do it, right? Okay, okay. It's not even my responsibility, but I'll just shut up and do it anyway."

"Stop! Don't you take that sloven corporate underling attitude with me!" Komachi placed her hands on her hips in anger, but then sighed in resignation. She groaned as if reflecting on the situation. "…Well, it's my assignment in the first place, so I'll finish the rest. Thanks for everything so far."

When she showed me how admirable she was, even I was itching to get the report done properly. It might be out of character for me, but maybe I should've done it seriously from the start as soon as I accepted the job regardless of how lazy I was feeling.

"Well… you know. It kind of got annoying in the latter half, so it just happened… Sorry, I'll help you as much as I can."

Komachi's eyes shined the moment I said that. She looked like a "yamapikaryaa"[4]. That word meant Iriomote cat around here. Yamapikaryaa!

"I knew you'd say that, onii-chan! That's why I love you, onii-chan!"

"Yeah, yeah, I love, love, love, I love you, too."[5]

She was exploding with her usual Komachi points again and albeit somewhat annoying, I dealt with her nonchalantly. After all, I did do most of the research so far, so I should at least conclude it myself.

As I typed explanations one after the other, our cat dragged himself over and listlessly sat in front of the screen.

Just why did cats occupy themselves in front of TVs and sit on top of newspapers, anyway…?

"Komachi."

"Roger." Komachi saluted and enacted her strategy to remove Kamakura.

When she swiped him up, Kamakura floundered his legs and tried to escape. Just like how some people had soft hair, a cat's fur was just as soft and smooth.

---

[4] Yamapikaryaa – A word in the local dialect of the Yaeyama language which can mean "that which shines on the mountain"

[5] Love, Love, Love, I Love You – A novell by Maijou Outarou.

Komachi was quick to take his guard down by tickling his neck and as soon as he did, she began brushing him. She went from head to tail while humming in glee.

"Fufufu. You're a bad little kitty if you think you could get in our way ☆."

"He's actually an old man if we're talking about his age."

How old was Kamakura again? He was around 4 or 5 years old when he arrived at our home. If we converted his age to human years, then he'd be roughly around Hiratsuka-sensei's age. I want to introduce our cat to her.

I handed over the research project material to Komachi and could finally start dealing with my own affairs.

The clock was just about to point to 11. I needed to get ready to head to my summer classes in the afternoon.

When I changed into the appropriate clothes, the intercom sounded.

Was it the redelivery I requested for from Amazon? *To think you guys would aim for the time period where I wasn't home, are you guys ninjas or something?*

When I opened the door of the entrance while squeezing my seal stamp, there was an unexpected individual there.

"Y-Yahallo."

Sporting a chinese bun style with light-brown dyed hair, wearing summer-like clothes, and supporting a carry bag with both hands, Yuigahama Yui was idly standing while being cautious of her surroundings.

"Y-Yeah…"

This unexpected sight caused me to freeze in place. We both stayed quiet as if feeling each other out, trying to figure out what we should do.

Speaking of people who had come to our front door to this day, the only people who I could think of was the express home delivery fellow and the old lady next door who passed on the circular notice to us, so I found it difficult to accept the fact that someone from my school had made their way into my private domain. An appropriate analogy would be like having a gazelle at an aquarium. The only places you'd see a gazelle were the savannas, zoos, or the world of Ultimate Muscle 2.[6]

I squeezed the open door, retained my cool, and said, "You need something?"

This should've been the second time Yuigahama had visited my home. The first time was when she came to express her gratitude after the recent car accident. However, I didn't meet her directly at the time.

"U-Um… is Komachi-chan home?"

She probably made some kind of promise with Komachi.

"Komachiii, your friend's hereeee." I called out to Komachi like a mother and she came down to the door. Before I noticed, she had changed her clothes. *Weren't you just wearing a single shirt earlier?*

"Hey Yui-san, welcome. Come on in, come on in, don't be shy."

[6] Ultimate Muscle 2 – Refers to Gazelleman

“Okay, thanks. E-Excuse me for intruding…” said Yuigahama, but as if feeling hesitant from going in our house, she took a small breath. She then took a step through the entrance as if she had prepared herself. Our home wasn’t a grand dungeon or anything, though.

Upon entering our home, Yuigahama curiously looked around. *C’mon, you really don’t need to touch that wooden bear.*

Another person’s home was not only mysterious, but an outer zone. I’m sure there’s some kind of culture shock when you entered a different cultural sphere. Yuigahama looked at the most ordinary of things like the stairs, windows, and walls. Every time, she’d go “ohh” or “woooow” which kind of got on my nerves…

Even after we made it into the living room on the second floor, Yuigahama still felt anxious with her eyes swimming around, but stopped them after seeing the shelf of books. She slid her fingers on the shelf and frighteningly opened her mouth, “Whoa, there sure are a lot of books.”

“Both my dad and onii-chan loves books, so it’s going to keep increasing and increasing.” Komachi answered from the kitchen counter.

I don’t think there were that many books, but she doesn’t look like the type to read either…

It’s extremely rare for someone to come to our house.

We were a prominent modern day family; both our parents worked and didn’t socialize very often with our neighbors. In the event we did meet with them, we’d at most exchange greetings and the only things we really knew about each other were our names.

Thanks to that, I had no idea how to receive our visitors. There’s not much I could do about being called an uncivil fool. I might just even throw ashes at the mortuary tablet of my dad’s funeral.[7] Oh wow, it’s like I’m some kind of famous figure. Just a worthless thought, but the guys who could proudly claim, “But hey, even Edison wasn’t very good at studying either!” were not only bad at studying but everything else as well. The more you know.

“Mm…”

I pulled the seat and suggested, “Why don’t you take a seat?” to Yuigahama with a groan.

It came out awkward since I wasn’t used to this kind of hospitality. I was like a super rural kid offering an umbrella to the city girl in the middle of the rain. Heck, I might just blurt out to her afterwards, “Haha! Your house is a haunted mansion”![8]

“Th-Thanks.”

When Yuigahama quietly took her seat, Komachi came from the kitchen and placed a cup on the table. The ice of the barley tea bumped into each other.

“So, what are you here for?” I asked her not knowing the actual reason for her visit.

Then, Yuigahama carefully showed the carry bag she was holding on her lap.

“Um, I asked Komachi-chan for a favor about Sabure…” said Yuigahama, and opened the bag.

---

[7] Throw ashes – Oda Nobunaga

[8] Tonari no Totoro

Once it was open, an indescribable, blasphemous, and hairy creature jumped out and crawled its way towards me. It had light brown fur with cute, round eyes, short legs, and a waggy and fluttering tail. If the times hadn't changed, then this creature would be the most noble of them all; it was a dog.

Yuigahama's dog, Sabure, aimed straight for me. *What am I, Friskies MonPetit[9]?* He didn't stop at all, running with all his energy.

SABURE used TACKLE! It's super effective! Hachiman blacked out![10]

Sabure rammed me down with excessive energy, licking as much as he could going "Hachiman, lick, lick!" and I peeled him off. I lifted him up and I could see his tail wagging up and down.

"What's with this guy…? Huh? Isn't his fur a lot shorter than before?"

Compared to two months earlier, the length of his fur appeared much shorter. Did he use the Beast Spear[11] last time or something?

"Ahh, right. Sabure has a long coat, so we gave him a summer cut."

"Oh ho…"

I mean, it's fine whatever it is, whether it be a Somersault, Uppercut, or a Spinning Piledriver.[12]

"So why'd you bring this mutt here?"

I released Sabure from my grasp, but he continued to circle around my legs and didn't seem to be leaving my side anytime soon. He's being so persistent that I wasn't sure what to do and just woof, woof, woof'd.

I made a complaining look to Yuigahama asking her to do something about him and Yuigahama called to him, "Sabure, come here."

As soon as he reached her, she picked him up and as she gently stroked him, she continued, "My family's going on a trip after this."

Family trip, huh…? Those words felt awfully nostalgic somehow.

I thought it wasn't a topic you talk about all that often once you became a high school student, but then again, I didn't have anyone to talk to about it, indeed.

"Your family seems pretty close. Unlike my family—"

"It's just onii-chan decides to stay home, right?" said Komachi, instantly answering.

Yuigahama murmured in astoundment, "That's Hikki for you…"

It's almost as if she's showing me some respect. *Oh hey, maybe you did have a good eye for people?* Or so I thought, but it turned out she was just looking at someone pitiful.

"…That's not it. It's because I said I wouldn't go when I was in middle school. After that, I just stopped going along with them, that's all."

---

[9] Friskies Monpetit – Cat food

[10] Pokemon

[11] The Beast Spear – Ushio to Tora

[12] Street Fighter moves

I wasn't exactly in my rebellious age, but it's oddly embarassing going on a trip with my family. So that's why I rejected the offer to go along, but my damn pops was totally happy about it…

Well, who cares about my pops. Yuigahama's trip was the main focus right now.

"So what's this about your trip?"

"Ah, yeah, so while we're on our trip, we were hoping to keep Sabure here for a little while or something."

Yuigahama looked up at me asking, "Is that okay?"

Although I was a Japanese person who could say "NO"[13] to most requests, seeing Komachi smiling from ear to ear as she rubbed Sabure made it difficult to turn her down.
But I couldn't just tell her upfront, "Okay, okay." Once she was given the first reply already, then there's no way I could give her another one.

[13] A parody of the book "The Japan That Can Say No"

I ♥
葉

"…Why bother leaving him at our place when we're so far away?"

Since it's Yuigahama, I'm sure she had plenty of close friends to ask and there's been recent talk about how pet hotels had improved quite a bit.

"The thing is, Yumiko and Hina have never owned a pet before. At first, I tried asking Yukinon, but she said there was a lot going on at her home, so…" Yuigahama mumbled hesitantly with an anxious look.

Well, Yukinoshita wasn't very good at dealing with dogs, so I'm sure she'd refuse anyway even if she wasn't at home… Ah, no, surprisingly, she might just say, "Leave it to me" and accept, only to timidly try to give food to Sabure. As I imagined the pleasant scenario, Komachi who noticed Yuigahama's silence asked further, "Did something happen with Yukino-san?"

When asked, Yuigahama stuttered. She then turned towards me with uncertain eyes. "R-Right… Hikki, do you keep in touch with Yukinon?"

"No, I don't even have her number."

I didn't own a carrier pidgeon and unless I tried stuffing a letter in a jar and have the ocean carry it to her, I had no way of contacting her. I asked Komachi with a look, "What about you?" and she shook her head.

"Like, I've been sending her a lot of mails and calling her a lot."

"So what's the problem?"

"Whenever I call her, the answering machine would pick up and then she'd send a mail to me later. It takes a long time for her to respond back to my mails, too… And like, her mails seem a lot less energetic or dull than they usually are… Whenever I try to invite her to go out, for some reason, she's always busy…"

"Haha…"

She's clearly avoiding you. I mean, that's what all the girls did in middle school when I sent them a mail, or so I wanted to say, but I stopped myself.

After all, Yuigahama wouldn't fail to recognize that someone was trying to push her away. As an expert of reading the mood and adjusting herself to it, there's no way she could miss seeing this basic of a basic step.

"I wonder if I did something wrong to her…" Yuigahama laughed weakly.

"Don't let it bother you. Maybe she really is just having a lot of stuff to deal with at her home. Once school starts again, things will just naturally go back to normal."

As out of character it was for me, I gave her some encouragement. It's my speciality to state baseless things like these. So for the phrase "full of lies" which encompassed 800 lies, I wanted to make it represent 80,000 lies instead.

But it certainly wasn't a complete lie. It's true that she had a lot going on at her home.

—This was in the beginning of August, more than two weeks ago.

That time when we went our separate ways after the camp.

Ever since Yukinoshita was taken back home by her older sister, Haruno-san, we had never met again.

But the car driven by their chauffeur that the Yukinoshita sisters rode in caused a series of flashbacks in my head.

About a year ago, Yuigahama and I were involved in an accident. What triggered that incident was a single chauffeur-driven car. I wasn't sure whether the car of the accident was the same one on that day a few weeks earlier. Only my vague memories related the two together.

There wasn't a single piece of evidence of it. Testimony, declaration, verdict, none at all.

In that continuing, murky atmosphere, only time continued on.

Even after my dubious encouragement, Yuigahama still looked worried. "Y-You think so…?"

"No, I have no idea."

"What the heck? That's too random." Yuigahama made a dumbfounded smile..

But I really didn't know anything.

I didn't know Yukinoshita Yukino.

Of course, I knew her on the surface; I knew her name, her face, how good her grades were, how she didn't get close to people, how she liked cats and Pan-san, how she had a pretty foul mouth, and how she could be rather careless sometimes.

But that's all I knew.

Knowing that much was by no means knowing someone. In the same way people didn't understand me, I didn't understand them either. That's something I musn't forget.

Exactly what was necessary so you could claim you "knew" someone?

When I was on the verge of falling into a labyrinth of thought, a small, noisy barking noise could be heard.

Upon looking, there was a low, growling noise afterwards. It looked like Sabure and Kamakura were engaged in a battle of intimidation, skittering around Komachi.

Kamakura threw up a barrier telling Sabure to not get any closer, but he tore it down with beams of fondness and chased after him. Komachi watched them in glee without putting a stop to their struggle.

Is this going to continue for a while…? I had an annoyed look and Yuigahama said apologetically, "A-Ahaha, s-sorry. We thought about the pet hotels too, but they're really packed during this season."

"And that's where we come in, onii-chan."

Komachi struck her chest with a "ta-dah!"and proudly chuckled. *Why do you look so reliable? Are you some kind of ship captain?*

Hmph, well, since she mailed Yuigahama a lot, I imagine the suggestion came up at some point.

"I mean if we don't do this, there won't be any opportunities in the summer. It's your chance!" Komachi quietly murmured.

I had the feeling her eyes sparkled with a flash ☆, but I was more occupied with her usage of Zaimokuza's favorite phrase, "Chance." I wonder if my influence had spread even further? I really hope it didn't get popular… I'd be a total victim.

"…Well, if Komachi's okay with it, then it's fine with me."

This was my clever little sister we're talking about here. She probably already made arrangements with mom. And once she conquered our mom, the only one left was our daughter-doting father.

At the Hikigaya household, the oldest son had no say in the decision-making. The hierarchy consisted of mom, followed by Komachi, pops, and lastly, me. Oh, the highest position was occupied by the cats, okay? They only saw humans as manservants.

"Anyway, we're fine with looking after him, but what should we do about his food? Pita Woof? Frontline? Don't tell me, you want Pedigree for him? We're not wealthy enough for that, you know."

"How the heck do you know so much…? Wait a minute, Frontline is for getting rid of fleas! Now I'm kinda worried…" Yuigahama quivered with a concerned expression.

Komachi smiled to relieve her of her concerns. "Don't worry, we used to own a dog a long time ago."

"R-Really?"

"Pretty much," I said. It's a pretty old story, though. My memories were a little fuzzy, but then again, I had the feeling either our parents or Komachi took care of him most of the time.

Yuigahama then smiled warmly. "Ohh, that's kinda surprising."

"My brother likes both cats and dogs. It's just people that he hates…"

Am I the first underworld detective[14] or something…?

But well, Komachi wasn't necessarily wrong. It's true that I didn't hate dogs or cats. If anything, it's certain breeds that I liked.

It's just cats in particular were what I liked.

Gentlemen, I liked cats. Gentlemen, I loved cats. I liked American shorthair cats. I liked toroiseshell cats. I liked Sphinx cats. I liked ragdolls. I liked American curl cats. I liked Scottish holder cats. I liked Persian cats. I liked Singapuras. I liked Russian Blue cats.

Back alley, cat beds, cat tower, the top of a refrigerator, under the bed, on the rail of the veranda, inside a cardboard box, in a paper bag, on a person's back, and in a futon.

I loved all the cats who were all over the place.

…Actually, it's the bastards who abused cats that I couldn't forgive. I wanted people who didn't cherish life to die. I absolutely hated people who didn't cherish life!

As I enacted out a fervent speech internally, Yuigahama showed a relieved smile. "I guess I won't have to worry then. Sabure seems attached to Hikki, too."

[14] Yu-Yu-Yu Hakusho

“Don’t get your hopes up. I’m the type of person much more suited to being watched over than doing the watching. You can even call me a pro of being cultivated.”
I had been raised for the past 17 years, so living any other way was out of the question. Since my personality was cultivated with my molded adolescence, there’s no way I could fix it now.

When I answered while poking Sabure who lay next to me with his stomach exposed, Komachi swiped him away. “Anyway, just leave Sabure-chan to me! I’ll make quick work of him to the point he won’t be able to go on without me!”

Komachi was brimming with motivation to steal him away.

“Oh, I’m not sure I’d like that, but… Okay, please take care of him for me then.” Yuigahama had an an uneasy look, but she bowed her head. She then looked at her inward-facing wristwatch to check the time.

“Ah, I should get going. My family’s waiting for me.”

“Sure, sure, I’ll see you off.”

I watched the two go by me and down the stairs with just my eyes while rummaging through the carry bag that Yuigahama entrusted me with. Inside the bag, there was dog food and other necessities needed for taking care of Sabure. By the way, the dog food was Science Diet. The dog was living a healthier life than I was…

As for Sabure, the dog in question, he was sniffing the room as he loitered around. Ahh, perhaps he’s reacting to the smell of a cat in here?

As for Kamakura, just when did he get away? He was plopped on top of the refrigerator and looking down on Sabure and me with sleepy eyes.
It’s not like he hated Sabure or had no interest in him. Since he didn’t know how to interact with him, he was acting weary and distant.

In his gaze that was as if he was retreating a step back, I remembered something.

It’s because it was Yuigahama’s birthday that it was still vivid in my mind.

A momentary break of clear weather in the rainy season. A girl wearing a lonely smile, the offensive red glow of the sunset raining down on her from behind.

At the time, she had undoubtedly drawn a line.

A line indicating that she was different from the two of us, the victims.

Exactly what was that boundary line?

Now I was finally beginning to understand what it was.

One day... Mobile talk Hachiman& Yui

hachiman's mobile

FROM Hachiman 19:45
TITLE Re
It's only been a day. Overprotective much?

FROM Hachiman 19:50
TITLE Re3
You swear I'm going to use them. Anyway, what should I be doing here? Anything to watch out for? I won't know how to handle him if I don't know what his strong and weak points are.

FROM Hachiman 19:55
TITLE Re5
See you.

FROM Hachiman 19:58
TITLE Re7
So what are his strong points?

FROM Hachiman 20:00
TITLE Re9
Idiot ^ ^

yui's mobile

FROM ☆★ Yui ★☆: 19:23
TITLE nontitle
▽･ω･▽Hello, woof. Is Sabure doing okay?

FROM ☆★ Yui ★☆: 19:48
TITLE Re2
C'mon, if you don't use any emoticons, it sounds like you're angry (` ･ω･ ´)

FROM ☆★ Yui ★☆: 19:55
TITLE Re4
Strong point... His body (´ ･ω･`)

FROM ☆★ Yui ★☆:
TITLE Re6
Wait! Forget what I said! Σ(° д °lll)

FROM ☆★ Yui ★☆:
TITLE Re8
His feet (｡'ω'｡) !

FROM ☆★ Yui ★☆: 20:01
TITLE Re10
That emoticon gets on my nerves (* ` ω ´)

As always, Kawasaki Saki's name can't be remembered.

It was an early afternoon of summer vacation.

The number of people riding the train seemed less than the usual.

I rode the train past several stations and got off at Tsudanuma station. I went through the ticket gates and turned right. From there, I entered the thin waves of people and continued on.

At the Sasaki Seminar of Tsudanuma Institute, summer courses were being held that targeted second years in high school. Students who were looking to buckle down on their entrance exams were already well on their way towards preparing starting this season.

But even so, we were still second years. A lax atmosphere pervaded the surroundings indicating that there was still room to take it easy.

If we were third years, there'd be sparks and electricity flying all over. There were even times where you'd get chased out of the lecture room for falling asleep in the middle of the lecture.

Afterwards, you'd be brought to some place resembling a drawing room and get yelled at by the lecturer, and be told by a tutorer halfway through, "…Do you want to change lectures?" with an admonishing tone; At least, that's what they said on the internet.

The classroom where a class of private-university difficulty targeting second year high school students was somewhat empty.

Lectures were five days a week. The curriculmn was set to teach English and Modern Japanese together for five days and optionally social studies.

A few days ago, I had finished up all the lectures for social studies, so today onwards, my schedule would consist of English and Modern Japanese lectures.

Due to no one noticing my entry into the room, I took a seat closest from the door at the front.

It's standard for seats to be designated as VIP seats, so it's an established fact that the most prominent cliques would occupy them. Since getting involved with them would only beget suffering, my seat was either one at the very front or somewhere in the middle. The seats that loners should aim for were the ones on the side edges since they were in good blind spots. Well, it might be difficult to see the blackboard, but you could concentrate easily in class; actually, it's because no one talked to you that you had to concentrate. Then again, that's a plus.

I promptly took out my textbooks and notes. I rested my cheeks in my hands in a daze until the lecture started.

I waited patiently for the scheduled time while watching groups of friends spend their time engaging in seemingly enjoyable chats.

Next summer, this peaceful mood would probably disappear.

High school exams were the same way.

Those who managed to receive a recommendation were maliciously insulted while those who passed were cursed from the shadows. I had a feeling which was almost definite that the same things would happen even after we turned into third years. And then four years later, the cycle would repeat when you were job hunting for sure. The nature of people wouldn't change whether it was three years or seven.

But right now, what I should be focused on was not the past, but what's in front of me. So for starters, I had to look towards university exams.

Those who started early would shift their attentions towards exams starting this summer and get serious. The first pressing goal was the center exams. *Put the goal at the center and get serious… Put the goal at the center and get serious… Put the goal at the center…* As I ran simulations with vacant eyes, someone appeared at the corner of my vision. As if shouting angrily, "Idiot! The explosions are obscuring my vision of the enemy!" I came to my senses in an instant.

Her dark blue hair tied into one bundle dangled down past her long back. Her tall figure looked flexible and attracted people's attention. She sported a long-T shirt with sleeves covering three-fourths of her arm, denim short pants, and leggings and had a sack lightly dangling over her shoulders. She walked apathetically in her sandals that rubbed against the floor.

When that girl walked past in front of me, she stopped. Finding her actions unnatural, I directed my eyes at her.

"…So you're taking classes here, too."

A drowsy voice spoke to me along with a cold gaze. Under her grumpy looking eyes was a mole.

She seems awfully familiar. Who was she again…?

"I might as well tell you now. Thanks."

I had no idea why she was thanking me, but it didn't seem like she got the wrong person. It's not a common occurence for a loner to be spoken to. Unless it's something important, no one spoke to loners.

"You know how you told me about that scholarship? I managed to get it. Things are going okay with Taishi, too."

The name "Taishi" had a familiar, but unpleasant ring to it. After querying my "I definitely won't forgive" list, I had a hit on the name Kawasaki Taishi. *Hoho, isn't that the poisonous insect that was trying to get close to Komachi?*

So was this person related to him?

After I looked at her dark blue hair, I realized something.

Blood Type Blue![15] Kawa… Kawagoe? Kawashima? Kawaragi…? Okay, I guess anything works. It's Kawasomething-san!

I thought she was GaGaGa Bunko[16] for a second there with how blue she was…

"Uh, yeah, sure. You're the one that made the scholarship happen, though."

For now, I went along with her conversation and then her name popped up in my mind. Her name was Kawasaki Saki.

"I guess, but Taishi just keeps talking about you… Whatever. Anyway, I gave you my thanks," said Kawasaki, telling me only that as if it was her obligation and left.

It was a curt exchange, but Kawasaki Saki was just that kind of girl. She chose to be alone and not approach anyone and gave off a teeny aura of delinquency.

A girl like that spoke to me of her own accord. It felt like her attitude had gotten rather soft. Intrigued by that change, I found myself following her with my eyes.

She took a seat three rows behind me, took out her cellphone, and moved her fingers. Judging by her behavior, she was probably typing a mail.

And there, Kawasaki broke into a smile.

…Huh, so she can make those kinds of expressions, too. I mean, usually she'd look out of it and look either really aggressive or overpowering. But anyway, that's a face you couldn't see at school. Then again, I don't recall ever seeing her at school either. It's a basic for fellow loners not to interfere with each other.

As I watched her thinking how I saw something rare, our eyes met.

The completely flushed Kawasaki made an incredible glare at me. Oh dear, what's with that person? So scary! I shook my head as if "my shoulders were completely frozen!" and then made the effort to remove myself from Kawasaki's gaze.

Nevermind, she didn't get softer at all. You're at a prep school for crying out loud, at least mellow out a bit. Round out that square head[17] *of yours.*

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[15] Blood Type Blue – Evangelion

[16] Publisher

[17] The logo of a prep school, Nichinoken

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Once the English lecture ended, there was a short break. I went down the stairs and bought a can of MAX COFFEE from a vending machine. I made my way back to the classroom I was in earlier while sipping it.

As for everyone else who took the same lecture, each of them was minding their own business; they were fiddling with their phones, reading a book, or staring at the textbook for the upcoming modern Japanese lecture.

Most people generally tend to be by themselves and in this situation in particular, loners were the majority as opposed to our regular schooling.

The situation was also different at the cram school I attended when i was in middle school.

Cram schools back then were ultimately just an extension of your daytime schooling and made it only more apparent that those who had no place to belong in middle school had no place anywhere else. And since everyone's relationships carried over to the lectures, they were considerably irritable spaces to be in.

Because of that, you became desperate to rise to the more advanced classes. For every tier you went up, the quietness of the classroom would increase as well as the range of lectures and student learning levels.

Now that I think back on it, perhaps people only hung out with others so they could justify their stay in the lower classes.

They halted all of their efforts using their friends as a reason and sought friendship as an excuse to stay in lukewarm waters. This model inspired situations like couples wanting to attend the same high school together or adjusting your level and bringing down your standards when choosing schools to go to.

Back then, those conversations in class that found their way to my ears really gave me the chills.

If you were really thinking of the other person, then you shouldn't be holding him back nor should you be pampering him in the first place. You were really just opting for the easy way out all so you could indulge in the continuity of your slovenly every day life.

On top of that, if you got wind of the rumor that you broke up within two months after getting into the same high school, you wouldn't be suffering from abomdinal pain on one side of your stomach, let alone the other; you'd be well on your way towards getting peritonitis. And that's where'd you say you were young to try to justify it, right?

Perhaps it's because I was observant to all of this on the side. I didn't believe for a second in friendships that were only in appearance or love like that. I had no faith in the type of kindness that indulged in self-sacrifice used for excuses or the type of kindness that's full of deception.

So regarding that point, the system of prep schools was good.

There's moderate intervention with the students as well as indifference between students. By eliminating all the processes that were unnecessary to studying, they were able to design an optimized system of efficiency. The cram school I attended back in middle school was considerably painful because of how buddy-buddy the students were with the lecturers… After all, most people were called by their first names while I was the only one called by my last…

Of course, lecturers and students could get along with each other just fine at prep schools if they wanted to. Like the system of tutors—basically university students working part-time—who acted as student support staff. Apparently, they didn't help with just your studies, but also served as personal and career consultants. It's like openly welcoming anyone who wanted to eact in an emotionally, moving teacher-pupil movie on exams.

Fundamentally, preparatory schools had cool and solid atmospheres. You were also liable to feeling even the cold sometimes. That atmosphere was comfortable for me.

People like normalfags (lol) could be found anywhere. If I drew a map of how their habitats were distributed, it'd be on the level of pill bugs and wharf roaches. I just don't understand why'd they want to be something the world was so full of already.

Good grief, swarms of them… It's because it's summer that they became so active. That's what made them like insects, too. And since I hated insects, it's a painful season.

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I was assaulted by a peculiar feeling of despondency when the lecture finished, possibly proof that I had concentrated for the past 90 minutes.

Unlike the good feeling of exhaustion you get from sports, exhaustion from studying felt like your spirit was gradually hanging over your head. All the glucose in my head had all been consumed and if it wasn't for the MAX COFFEE I had earlier, I would've been in a much worser condition. TONE Coca-Cola Bottling Company should definitely produce some products as a collaboration with test taking students; they'd probably sell.

Now that my lectures for the day were over, I began preparing to head home.

Loners were the most energetic when it's time to head home.

Fortunately, Tsudanuma was considerably advanced for an entertainment district. There was an abundance of book stores and arcades. It's a district that wouldn't leave any high school bored.

As I pondered over where to stop by on my way back home, there were taps at the edge of the table.

I looked in the direction of the taps and Kawasaki Saki was standing with a grumpy look. *What? If you need something, say something. Do you have woodpeckers for parents?*

"…Do you need something?"

Since she was giving off a "Hear me out, damn it!" aura, I decided to obediently ask her for her business. When I did, Kawasaki hesitantly let out a small sigh. *Jeez, if you have a problem with me, then don't talk to me. Which is it?*

"Hey, are you free?"

"Uh, I actually have some stuff to do."

I automatically spat out a cliche phrase I used when refusing something. This act of preserving equilibrium by rejecting an invitation was more or less an instinct at this point. It's a sensible act in today society's on the same vein as "don't pick up unknown phone numbers".

Most of the time, people would simply back off going, "Ohhh, right, uh huh." That's what they'd do, but the fact they gave up so easily meant their invitation was just a common courtesy. Heck, they looked totally relieved when they were refused. Good grief, be more careful, would you? I feel there were times where it'd be better to not invite someone out of kindness.

But it didn't look like Kawasaki had invited me as a common gesture. Actually, I wasn't even sure if this woman knew how to be that polite. She's pretty outspoken especially since she didn't cower away from Yukinoshita or Hiratsuka-snsei.

Kawasaki's listless eyes narrowed. "Like what?"

"Uh, well, you know, stuff… Like, with my little sister."

I brought out Komachi's name as an act of desperation. Kawasaki slightly nodded. "Oh really. Good. Mind coming with me for a bit?"

"Huh?" I responded briefly for an explanation.

Kawasaki tiredly answered, "I don't really have any business with you, but Taishi does. He's here at Tsudanuma right now."

Huh, I see. So that meant she was mailing her little brother earlier. She must've had some kind of brother complex if she made a smile like that in the middle of her mail. Oh, but she did seem like she'd have a complex about her bras, too. If they're too big, they had little to offer in terms of cuteness. That's what my flat sister said!

"Sorry, but I don't have any reason to spare your little brother any of my ti—."

"Your little sister's with him though."

"What, okay, where should we go? Are they close? Can we get to them by feet within five minutes? Should we run?"

Say that first.

"You know…"

She made a disgusted face for an instant, but I didn't pay Kawasaki any attention and promptly got to my feet. I left the classroom with Kawasaki following behind me.

"It's the Saizeriya right outside of this place. Know where it is?"

"Don't look down on me. I know every single thing about the Saizeriya, especially the one next ot eh Sobu Line."

Heck, I even knew where the very first Saizeriya store was located. Saizeriya's origins started in Motoyawata. Although they weren't running any businesses over there, they had signs set up there.

It totally made me want to write on the signs that the "Tora no Ana" office and its distribution centers were actually in Motoyawata.

I exited through the entrance of the institute into the oppressively hot street. There wasn't even a slightest breeze as the sunrays that were as though they were distorted by the heat poured down on me.

The time between lectures. With people heading back and coming from the station, the density of people in this neighborhood skyrocketed.

Kawasaki and I barely made any conversation as we maneuvered our way through openings of the waves of people. I typically acted independently, so I had become rather skilled at choosing empty paths to walk through. From here on was Stealth Hikki's time to shine![18]

Apparently, Komachi and the poisonous insect were at the nearby Saizeriya.

How convenient. There were knives, forks, and an abundance of lethal weapons at my disposal. Even better, I could rub his face with a hot, hot Milano Doria after smashing it into him like a pie. I just needed to superimpose, *The staff deliciously accepted the food and everything should be fine. They should forgive me for everything with that. And afterwards, I could finish him off by rubbing tar sauce on his open wounds.

I could feel my Soul Gem turning completely black.[19] Whoa, not good. At this rate, I'll become a magical girl. Let's think about fun things instead… So when's "Magical Girl Totsuka ☆ Saika" gonna start?

My feelings reached an explosive point as I waited for the traffic signals and Kawasaki who had been a step behind me opened her mouth. "By the way, Yukinoshita was taking the summer courses, too."

"…Ohh, that so."

Hearing her name caused me to react late.

As I recall, Yukinoshita was supposedly aiming to go to a natioanl school for the sciences. Kawasaki seemed to be taking those lectures as well. Well, in this season, it's natural if you still hadn't figured out what schools you wanted to go to. The only reason I was aiming for a private school for the liberal arts was because I was a complete wreck in mathematics. While we're at it, my only choice in the future was to be a full-time house husband.

"I thought so before, but it really is hard to approach her."

You're one to talk… You do realize that you're always emitting that scary aura that girls and even guys were afraid of, right?

"Why are you looking at me?"

"It's nothing…"

She narrowed her uninterested eyes and gave me a piercing stare. I frantically looked away. I just found it easy to imagine how Yukinoshita and Kawasaki would act in a classroom. While they attracted everyone's attention, there wasn't a single person who'd approach them.

That behavior was very representative of them, but I felt the things that were at their roots were completely different.
Kawasaki's aggressiveness came from her poor ability to communicate, but I felt there was more underneath it. It's the stereotypical pattern where she'd say too little. I think she's just a bad speaker. If you saw her love for her little brother, you could tell at least that much.

[18] A reference to Momoko "Stealth Momo" Touyoko who often says this line
[19] Madoka

On the other hand, Yukinoshita was never really trying to be aggressive. It's just she herself was a form of aggression. People who were superior were dazzling. They evoked inferiority complexes and jealousy from others. It's those things that caused her to be barred away from her surroundings and be subjected to spite. But even worse, Yukinoshita was the type to completely confront that maliciousness and crush it into a pulp.

If Kawasaki's actions were a means to guard herself through intimidation, then Yukinoshita's actions were always aimed for retribution.

The traffic signals turned green.

When I walked out, Kawasaki raised her voice in restraint. "…Hey. Could you thank her for me? I never really managed to find the right time to tell her in the end."

"Tell her yourself."

"Well, I'd like to, but it's like, kinda awkward."

Finding it peculiar that Kawasaki's voice was somewhat timid, I looked at her. She dropped her eyes and walked on while looking at the ground. "There's always someone you can't get along with even if it's not their fault, right?"

"Yeah."

Yes. That's certainly true.

That's why the biggest compromise you could make was not to interfere with each other. The decision to not involve yourself was also a way to be on mutual terms.

Getting close and friendly, chatting with a smile, going out and having fun together; they weren't just ways to get involved with others. They did those things to estalibsh an appropriate distance with others so they wouldn't be detested, an act which I think deserved praise.

This was probably how Kawasaki saw Yukinoshita.

You had no choice but to accept it, but you still couldn't approach that person. It's because you understood that nothing good would come from the both of you taking that step for each other, that you were confident that you'd just hurt each other. That's why you kept your distance. This wasn't running away or trying to be evasive, but a realistic way to handle the situation; a display of respect.

"Also, I don't think we'll be meeting for a while. If I don't see her in the lectures, then the next time would be the start of school, right? Our classes are different, too. But you can meet her for club or something, right?"

"No, I don't think I'll be seeing her until school either."

At the very least, we wouldn't see each other voluntarily. When I think about it, my relationship with Yukinoshita was exactly that. Unless we were compelled to, we wouldn't approach each other. It's not like I knew her number anyway.

Once we made it past the crosswalk, we descended down a flight of stairs that led underneath a building. Footsteps weakly echoed.

"And even if we do meet, it's not like we'll actually talk about anything."

"True. It's not like we talk about anything either."

“Exactly.”

Actually, if you talked to me, I’d respond back properly, you know? As a matter of fact, I was incredibly courteous to the point that it’d be creepy. But if I knew the person I was talking to was a loner like Kawasaki, we were like birds of a feather which made it easier for me to act as I wanted.

As we continued climbing down, we were on the first floor of the underground.

After entering the store through the automatic door, Komachi was sitting at the table immediately next to the drink bar. When she saw me, she waved her hand. “Ohh, onii-chan.”

“Ohh.” I briefly responded and sat next to her. Ahead of me was a middle school student with a name resembling Sano Yakuyoke Daishi[20]. When our eyes met, he bowed his head.

“Hey onii-san, sorry for bothering you.”

“Don’t call me onii-san. I’ll kill you.”

“Hey, you picking a fight with my little brother?”

Kawasaki had silently taken a seat in front of me and was radiating with wrath.

Holy, she’s staring daggers at me! People with brother complexes were seriously creepy. Doting on a blood relative was totally creepy. Like totally creepy.

While Taishi soothed Kawasaki who was growling with intimidation, I sounded the bell and promptly made my order.

I asked for a drink bar for two people. Since Kawasaki was frightening, I gave up on face smashing with the Milano Doria.

As they would in the business world, I took my coffee and sipped it before getting down to business.

“So, didn’t you need me for something?”

“Yes. The thing is, I wanted to ask you stuff about Sobu High.”

“Uh, ask your sister right there.”

Kawasaki went to my school and she was even in my class. I had to make sure of that, otherwise, I had the feeling I’d forget her.

“I really want to hear what another guy thought about it!”

For some reason, Taishi was gripping his fist. Why does he look so into it…?

But he could fire all sorts of questions at me, but the answers I could give weren’t really anything that great.

“There’s nothing particularly special about our school. I imagine it’s not all that different from other high schools. I guess our school events might differ just a little though, like how flashy our Cultural Festival could be or the levels of our clubs.”

[20] Sano Yakuyoke Daishi – Another name for Kawasaki Daishi which is a temple

I didn't really know for sure since I had never seen other high schools before, but that's my impression of them. At the very least, if we limited the schools to the ones with the standard, full curriculum, then it shouldn't be a problem putting many schools under a typical cateogry. Ignoring the schools with special curriculums, most schools weren't all that distinct. In fact, my image of high school before and after was mostly the same.

My one miscalculation was having to join the Service Club.

"Mm? But if the school's standard test score averages are different, wouldn't the school atmosphere be different?" Komachi curiously tilted her head.

"Well, I think having a higher average leads to less delinquets. That's not going to change those who admire delinquets though."

I shifted my gaze diagonally from me. When Kawasaki noticed that, she glared back. "And why are you looking at me…? I don't admire them."

Oh, was I wrong? It's just, I couldn't help but get the feeling you'd say something like, "Not the face, go for the body, the body"[21] so…

I cleared my throat as if hiding the fact I was pressured by Kawasaki's glare and started over. "Right, so the gist is, the only thing that changes is the ratio of people from your middle school to the people in high school. And so, everyone tries to act like a 'high schooler' and it gets really annoying."

"Oh, act like a 'high schooler', huh?" Taishi tilted his head not understanding what I was getting at.

"I don't know what you're hoping for, but when it comes down to it, everyone's just acting as if they're getting closer to their ideal of a "high school student" often see in fiction. It's superficial stuff like that for the most part."

I'm sure an unwritten law like, "One must act like a high school student" existed somewhere.

High School Student Ordinance
One. A high school student shall have a boyfriend or girlfriend.
Two. A high school student shall be surrounded by many a friend and be stupidly loud.
Three. A high school student shall be like a "high school student" in dramas and movies.
Those who defy the aforementioned clauses shalt disembowel themselves.

Or something like that.

If I had to say, it's similar to how people would admire the Shinsengumi—Hijikata Toshizou's samurai code in particular—for their samurai-likeness instead of actually being one.

If you wanted to combine ideals with reality, then you had to do the impossible somewhere.

For example, boys went out of their way to become popular by humoring a girl through mails, treat them whenever the chance came up, and appeal to them by being as loud as possible. But truthfully, they were really just docile people.

[21] A line said by Junko Mihara from Kinpachi-sensei 3-B, a television drama

Or maybe even the girls who wanted to get along with others by taking up fashion that's all the rage (lol), attend mixers just so the numbers were even, and listen to the latest hit J-POP songs. But truthfully, they had hobbies that were more proper and more in line with maidens.

But even so, they'd strive to do all that. All so they didn't veer off from being "normal". They didn't want to be excluded out of the value of being "everyone".

"Ooph… I think I heard stuff I didn't want to hear…" Taishi made a gloomy expression after listening to what I said.

"Well, this is just the point of view from someone twisted. If you really do want to get along with someone, then you better be prepared to sacrifice something."

It's a lot of trouble living differently from others, but living the same as others was just as hard. Living's hard.

"Oh oops. Looks like everyone's almost done with their drinks."

Komachi hummed a tune to loosen up the heavy atmosphere and collected everyone's cups. It looks like she was going to get more drinks. Seeing that, Kawasaki stood up. "I'll go too. I don't think you'll be able to carry everything."

Komachi thankfully accepted her proposal and the two headed for the drink bar.

I vaguely watched them leave.

After that, Taishi shot up his face as if remembering something. He made curious glances in the direction of Kawasaki and Komachi and then inched his body closer to me.

"A-Ahem… It might be kind of weird asking this," said Taishia, leaning forward with a whispering voice. "But how are the girls? Are they cute? Like Yukinoshita-san, she's super beautiful, right?"

——Hoho, so he wanted to talk about this all along. So his energy from the start was because he wanted to ask about this.

When he posed me the question, I gave it some thought. Well, if I had to say, it certainly did seem like there were a lot of girls at our school…

Actually, in my school life, the only impressions I had were "cute girls" and "funny faces that left an impact". That's why I didn't remember much about any normal girls.

"You're right, there certainly are a lot of cute girls. There's this International Liberal Arts class and it's comprised of 90% girls. So that basically means there are a lot of girls. Therefore, the percentage of beautiful girls increases."

"Ohh! That's a Dreamy Situation[22]!"

What's with that catch phrase that only Bandai would say? That's like, a Dreamy Creation. But still, I had to tell him straight.

"But look here, Taishi…" I continued my words in a slow, but understandable manner. "You know what mom says all the time. You might like a cute girl, but that doesn't mean she'll like you back."

[22] Dreamy Situation – Bandai Catchphrase

“M-My eyes have been opened!” Taishi shot open his eyes as if he had been struck by lightning and had gone through an epitome, his initial intensity disappearing off somewhere.

“The important thing is to know when to give up. If push doesn’t come to shove, then give up. A journey of a thousand miles begins by giving up[23] is an important mentality to have.”

Nowadays, I’d like to also suggest, “Know your enemy, know thyself, and you shall give up on hundreds of battles.”[24]

“Besides, do you think you can get along with someone like Yukinoshita?”

“That’s true… At least, I don’t think I can! That person’s kinda scary!”

An exceedingly honest opinion. I’d love to present him several types of axes. Rather than an unattainable flower, she was a flower that bloomed in the Guiana Highlands.

To people who didn’t know Yukinoshita Yukino very well, she was somehow scary, needlessly overbearing, and might even appear arrogant.

That’s how I saw her at first… That is, um, only if our first chance encounter had been at the club, though.

“Kuh, Sobu High… A frightening place, I say…” Taishi shuddered for some reason and spoke differently.

Since it irritated me a bit, I decided to finish him off. “Your environment might change, but that doesn’t mean you will. Thinking something will change once you get into high school is nothing but an illusion. You’d better stop dreaming now.”

First, I’ll destroy that screwed up illusion of yours![25] Haha, okay, well, I used to have those expectations at some point before, too. But that kind of high school life was just a distant Utopia. Informing him of reality now was a form of kindness.

“Hey, stop bullying him so much,” said Komachi, just returning from the drink bar. She placed the glasses on the table and poked me in the head.

Wroooong! I wasn’t bullying him. I was just teasing him, that’s all. I did a little grumbling internally like how elementary students would make excuses. Then again, I could really imagine those guys saying stuff like that.

“You don’t need to take him seriously, Taishi. Anyway… just think about passing first.” Kawasaki sat next to Taishi, sipped her cup, and stated.

Taishi’s body shook for an instant and he groaned. “Urgh…”

“Is he having trouble?”

“Honestly, he’s cutting it close with his level. That’s why I’m always telling him to study…” Kawasaki answered my question in place of Taishi. The added lecture caused Taishi to lower his head.

“Uuuugh…”

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[23] Original phrase is “A journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step”

[24] Original phrase is “Know your enemy, know thyself, and you shall win hundreds of battles.”

[25] Kamijou Touma’s pet phrase in To Aru no Majutsu Index

To make him feel better, Komachi encouraged him. “It’ll be fine, Taishi-kun. Even if you don’t end up at Sobu High but at an entirely different school from me, I’ll still be your friend! No matter what happens, we’ll always be friends!”

“N-No matter what happens, we’ll always be friends… S-Sure…”

“Yep, absolute friends. We’ll be primatal friends♪!”
That was the final nail in the coffin… I was perfectly fine with it as her older brother, but as a fellow male, I could sympathize. It’s pitiful seeing him driven into the corner like that.

“Well, you know, how about a goal? If you have something you can work hard for, then you’ll be able to try harder,” I said.
Taishi lifted his face. “A goal?”

“Yeah. This isn’t something I can boast about, but in my case, I tried pretty damn hard when I thought about how I’d go to a school those guys in middle school wouldn’t definitley go to. Every year, there’s only one person from my middle school who goes to Sobu High.”

“You really can’t boast about that at all…” Kawasaki made a bitter smile. That’s only because you were drinking coffee, right?

“For me, it’s because onii-chan goes there!”

“Yes, yes, we know, we know.”

I ignored her opportunistic appeal and Taishi made a serious look and faced Kawasaki. “Nee-chan, did you have one, too?” He asked.

She placed the cup down. “I… forget about me, okay?” She thought briefly, but then turned her face away.

But I had an idea of what her reason was. If that got across to Taishi, I’m sure it’d help with his motivation, too…

“…Well, if you’re looking to aim for a national or public school with cheap tuition, our high school’s pretty amazing in that regard.”

“Hey, don’t say more than you need to!” Kawasaki frantically gave me a glare. But her face that turned red from embarassment had no impact at all. Fool. The feeble eyes of a brocon were not worth fearing.

Taishi looked like he heeded my words and nodded. “Oh okay…”

I’m sure there were all kinds of reasons.

Not just for Kawasaki Saki, but even for others.

Just as there were people who chose arbitrarily, there were people who could only decide on one thing.

Not all answers were refreshing and positive. If someone decided on something regardless of what cowardly and pessimistic method they used, I think that’s fine.

“I’ve decided. I’m gonna go to Sobu High!” Taishiki informed me with a reassured expression.

“Well, give it your best shot,” I told him with my true feelings… But after giving it more thought, Komachi was aiming for my high school, too.

"…If you make it, I'll show you a good time. And by good time, I mean a good time in a Sumo match."

"You look ready to kill me, you know!?"

Kawasaki sent me a harsh stare in defence of the frightened Taishi. After that, I looked over the bill.

"So are you guys done? It's almost time for us to go home."

I looked at the clock and it was nearing the time for dinner. I took out a 1,000 yen bill from my wallet, placed it on the table, and stood up from my seat.

Taishi answered with a yes and stood up and bowed to me.

"Onii-san! Thank you very much."

"Oh, stop it… Because your chances of ever calling me onii-san completely went out the window earlier."

"That's what you meant!?"

Watching our exchange from the side, Komachi tapped her chin with her index finger and tilted her head.

"Hmm? But if Saki-san gets married with onii-chan, it wouldn't be weird for him to call you onii-san, right?" said Komachi, bluntly.

Kawasaki stood up in a frantic. "A-Are you an idiot!? What's with your little sister!? L-Like hell that'll ever happen!"

I could hear voice coming from her back as she left the store. Making sure she couldn't hear me, I murmured with a bitter smile. "Damn straight. I won't be marrying anyone unless it's someone who'll take care of me."

“There he goes again! Onii-chan’s scumbag defence!”

“Hey stop it, don’t call it defence.”

It’s anything but that. “Have someone raise me” was called an absolute front.

Today as well.

All quiet on the absolute front.[26]

[26] Reference to the novel, “All Quiet on the Western Front”

One day...
Mobile talk
Hachiman&
Taishi
(saki)

hachiman's mobile

FROM Hachiman 18:07
TITLE Re
Who?

FROM Hachiman 18:10
TITLE Re3
How'd you get my number? What do you want? Also, who?

FROM Hachiman 18:15
TITLE Re5
It's not a big deal. So, who?

FROM Hachiman 18:21
TITLE Re7
Hoh, in the bath

M Hachiman 18:22
TITLE Re9
Give me the rundown on her clothes. Is her underwear with her clothes?

FROM Hachiman 18:26
TITLE Re11
"A"? What the heck is "A"? Is that short for "Ah, her underwear"? I'm not going to understand if you abbreviate it that much.

FROM Hachiman 18:44
TITLE Re13
Damn brocon...

taishi's mobile

FROM Taishi 18:05
TITLE nontitle
It's Kawasaki Taishi! Thank you for today!
Thanks to you, I'm all fired up!

FROM Taishi 18:08
TITLE Re2
I totally typed in my name , you know!? It's Kawasaki Taishi!

FROM Taishi 18:10
TITLE Re4
I just wanted to say thanks. It's Kawasaki Taishi!

FROM Taishi 18:20
TITLE Re6
Nee-chan said not to bother, but I just wanted to thank you anyway. Right now, she's in the bath so it was my chance! It's Kawasaki Taishi!

FROM Taishi 18:22
TITLE Re8
You're not asking who this time!? Nee-chan usually leaves the bath without clothes, so it's a real pain.

FROM Taishi 18:24
TITLE Re10
A

FROM Taishi 18:30
TITLE Re12
It's short for "Are you looking to die?" The next time you tell my brother weird things again, you're dead.

Surprisingly, Totsuka Saika's election is tasteful.

Exactly for how long could you be called a boy?

Let's take a moment to discuss this boundary line called puberty that differentiated a child from an adult.

Was it up until middle school? High school? Or perhaps, university?

Or could it be up until you turned twenty and started working? If so, that meant I'd be a boy for all of eternity…

In any case, I didn't have a simple answer to that conundrum, but I at least feel that I should be classified as a boy since I was laying on the sofa watching anime.

But calling someone a child for watching anime wasn't either since there were plenty of fine adults in the world who watched it or even had jobs related to it. That's why unless people bought the DVDs, anime couldn't be created. That of course applied to second seasons and the smaller the industry became, the more difficult it'd be to create new works. So by all means, everyone, please buy the Blu-rays and DVDs.

I digress.

Basically, I felt that trying to distinguish between an adult male and a boy based on "hobbies" was impossible.

In that case, what did we need to be considered as a "boy"?

And here, I wanted to say I had a breakthrough to this mind-boggling problem.

The reason was just a mail with a single line.

[Hello. Are you free tomorrow??]

Never in my life had I been witness to a mail so heartwarming, in just one line to boot. It was a mail I wanted to read aloud. I was even willing to make a song out of it. I was well on my way towards winning an award for it.

Last night, Totsuka Saika had sent me this mail which brought me to this internal conundrum of "boys".

To what extent were you a boy? It's too difficult to solve this conundrum of distinction by things like titles, age, and hobbies, and now, I had arrived at the conclusion that using even gender was too complicated. The laws of the universe meant nothing.[27]

I was painfully lacking in samples that would allow me to uncover the truth.

[27] Final Fantasy V – Neo-Exdeath's quote

And in order to secure material as reference, I exerted myself.

I sent back a reply with about five hundred characters long using emoticons I'd never, ever use in a normal situation. I made sure not to forget a question mark at the end as well, of course.

In the brief moment we exchanged mails, I was euphoric. With how utterly happy I was, it wouldn't be weird to classify this as some kind of drug.

As such, I had made a promise to hang out with Totsuka.

The mind-boggling, conundrum, or whatever doesn't even matter anymore, right!?

× × ×

It was just about time for our appointment.

The August sun came down brilliantly with hot-blooded power[28] while a lukewarm wind blew by in a clean-cut match.[29]

My discomfort index was on the verge of rising.

But in despite of all of that, I spotted someone who was radiating, sparkling and glittering[30]. He jogged my way upon noticing me and as I watched him, his noble heart was snowing, falling, and gathering…[31]

With the twinkling, shining, light of the future, I found Totsuka and was ultra happy![32]

Totsuka's coming!

"Hey Hachiman! Sorry for being late!" In a boyish attire, Totsuka rested his hands on his knees, making deep breaths having ran to me.

"Don't worry about it. I actually got here pretty early."

Yeah, I got here exactly three hours earlier, so you don't have to worry. At all.

"You weren't really late either, so you didn't have to run over here in a hurry."

"Oh, right. But I might as well since I saw you." Totsuka laughed as if trying to hide his embarrassment.

It could've been the sunlight at fault or maybe not, but his excessive radiance caused me to frantically avert my eyes.

"Ahh. So, what should we do?"

Through our exchange of mails, Totsuka and I only promised to hang out somewhere.

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[28] Pretty Cure – Cure Sunny's phrase
[29] Pretty Cure – Cure March's phrase
[30] Pretty Cure – Cure Peace's phrase
[31] Pretty Cure – Cure Beauty's phrase
[32] Pretty Cure – Cure Happy's phrase; ultra happy is the actual person's pet phrase

At the very end, we decided we'd figure out what to do after we met today which meant our situation was overflowing with entertainment factors. But thanks to that, I spent the entire night thinking and was lacking sleep.

As high schools would so aptly state, "hang out" meant what exactly? I didn't know the specifics behind that kind of conduct.

This made me unsure of what to suggest.

But if it's around Kaihin Makuhari Station, the station we chose to rendezvous, then mostly everything was there.

Arcades, karaoke pubs, movie theaters, and RC race tracks. There were plenty of places to shop as well. Entertainment here was not lacking in the least.

"Hmm, I had a lot of things in mind…"

When I asked Totsuka, he took a moment to think, unable to give an immediate answer.

"But I wasn't really sure what you like, Hachiman," said Totsuka, still in the middle of thought he nodded his head. He was earnestly worrying over my interests. Because it's so rare for someone to actually give me any consideration, I found myself staring at him.

To begin with, the people I knew were all selfish… Yukinoshita's a no-brainer, but Yuigahama, Zaimokuza, and even Komachi were all pretty blunt when it came to what they wanted. Look at Hiratsuka-sensei, her desires were the only things occupying her head, right? She's well on her way towards getting serialized into a series of frustrated female teachers.

But even so, as a person who had lacked interests and hobbies, any consideration towards me was moot since it'd be difficult to actually come up with something. Even I didn't fully understand everything about myself.

My vacation was mostly just me sitting around doing nothing, too…I mean, all I did was laze around, seriously. I'd sleep in until noon and once I woke up, I'd either just go to a bookstore or a library.

Feeling sorry for making Totsuka work on my behalf, I hastily suggested a compromise. "Why don't we just take a look around for now?"

"Oh okay, sure. I guess it'd be faster if we both decide on something."

I felt something when he said that we'd "both decide on something". To this day, most of the time, I had to choose things for myself, so this was a fresh experience for me. Totsuka's just so nice of a person that we might just end up naming our child together.

We accompanied each other as we restlessly walked in front of the early afternoon station.

But with how blistering hot it was outside, we were probably better off entering a building and going from there. So we needed to decide on what to do first.

Shopping… I didn't have anything in particular to buy, so I'll pass on that. The arcade… Well, that could work. Totsuka having interest in games was questionable, but he didn't seem like a serious gamer. I could see him being more interested in medal or crane games instead though…

So that leaves… that place, maybe…?

I decided to head towards Cineplex Makuhari, the building which housed the arcade I had in mind. The Cineplex name was similar to Aniplex, but it's actually owned by the Kadokawa group. Aside from the Screen 10 movie theater, they had an arcade and all kinds of restaurants.

After we entered the building and went straight ahead, we arrived in an area that was lavish with decorative illuminations and filled with poppy sound effects.

They had game attractions meant for physical activity instead of video game cabinets and they had a focus on shoot 'em ups, rhythm games, medal games, and crane games; there were photo booths and even darts. This arcade could be said to be targeting active youths. There were numerous high schools and universities in the area, so their target demographic had to be them. As for other things, restaurants and movie theaters were situated side by side giving the impression that they were expecting lots of family demand.

As we walked around inside, Totsuka made a sudden stop.

"What's up?" I asked, my eyes directed in the same direction as Totsuka. Posted on the wall was a poster advertising a currently showing movie.

"They're already showing this movie, huh…?" Totsuka stared at the poster in interest.

"So movie?"

"Ah, I'm okay with doing whatever you'd like Hachiman!" Totsuka shook his hands in distraught.

"Nah, let's watch the movie. Come to think of it, this will be my first time watching a movie with someone that's not my family. It shouldn't hurt every now and then."

The time I actually watched a movie with someone else was when I was younger. It was at the Marinpia movie theater which was long gone now, but the only reason I went was because Komachi forced me to go with her while mom was out shopping.

After becoming a middle school student, I went to watch movies by myself. Since it was near my home, I could just stop by there whenever I felt like going out.
Totsuka went silent for a moment before giving me a modest look. "You sure?"

He asked me, but I had only one answer.

"Yeah."
I decided; my very first partner was going to be Totsuka!

× × ×

Surprisingly, Totsuka chose a horror movie.

We selected our seats at the service counter and bought our tickets.

25E and 25F. Totsuka and I were fellow neighbors in the back.

After we bought some popcorn, cola, and had our ticket stubs ripped, we went straight into the auditorium.

Although it's summer vacation, the only ones actually on break were students; normal working adults were still going about their week as always. So the auditorium wasn't very packed.

But in light of that, the main customers were the students. As a matter of fact, scummy couples and garbage lovers were gleefully frolicking at empty areas in the room.

I thought I saw someone like Miura mixed in those groups of trash, but I apparently just imagined it. Why did people like them tend to sport similar faces and appearances, anyway? Because I couldn't tell them apart at all. Were they all clones?

The more incessant they were about personality, the less they had of it. The more you know.

As for others, sometimes you'd get that oddball who'd misunderstand the meaning of personality and wear a coat during the peak of summer. An exemplary model of this kind of person was sitting in a seat at the very front breathing out like a grizzly bear.

My instincts fired off warning alarms telling me that I shouldn't look at him, so I did as I was warned and decided to search for our seats.

I checked each row one by one for our numbers while walking in the auditorium that was submerged in a unique silence before the start of a movie and slight feeling of nervousness. Totsuka had entered the room before I did and when he found our seats, he waved to me. He must've been holding his voice back since we were inside the auditorium.

I leaned back into my seat and placed my hand on the armrest. It was a magnificent act on my part that resembled some imperturbable great demon kin.

But the armrest felt so soft and light.

"Oh, sorry…"

Upon hearing that apology, I realized I had touched something. It was Totsuka's arm. I just touched an angel![33]

"O-Oh, nah! That was my fault there!" I said, and we both withdrew our hands in a hurry.

"……"

"……"

We both had looked away and there was an awkward silence.

I made a checking glance at Totsuka and he was facing downwards in embarrassment with his shoulders tucked in. *However, he was a man.

The auditorium was air-conditioned, so the miniscule warmth I could feel coming from him made me feel itchy. *However, he was a man.

We exchanged looks at each other trying to find the right timing to speak up and Totsuka whispered in a small voice, "H-Hachiman, you can use it if you want."

"Uh, I'm right-handed, so I'll just relax my body on my right hand. Don't mind me! You know what they say about your left hand is used just to guide things or whatever!"[34]

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[33] K-On! song

For some reason, pointless excuses came out of my mouth.

Listening to that, Totsuka chuckled with a “you’re so weird”.

“Okay, let’s share half of it then,” said Totsuka, and he placed his elbow on a third of the armrest.

“R-Right…” I nervously and slowly rested my left hand on there as well.

Ahh! My left hand! My left hand was completely happy!

Hurray. For. World. Peace.[35]

If the world was a place with a hundred Totsukas, there’d never be any wars. Arm dealers would be out of business, for sure. All the things that caused stress would disappear. It’s like some kind of lavender effect or something.

Because of that, the movie robber that slimily danced on the big screen that usually irritated me didn’t today.

× × ×

The movie was reaching its climax.

I think… I wasn’t very sure. The story was one thing, but I didn’t even know how much time had passed either. An hour, two hours? Or maybe ten minutes?

This fun period of time had gone by too fast. The actual time I was able to experience it wasn’t any longer than an hour.

The notion of time changed depending on the observer.

“Whoa wow!”

[34] Slam Dunk – When Sakamich gets taught how to shoot by the Akagi.

[35] Jinrui – Line by the fairies

A spirit clothed in a white one piece dress popped out at us in 3D causing Totsuka to lightly shake and grip my clothes.

Whoa, that was scary. Really, even I felt like my heart was going to shut down there. He was just so cute…

A surprised Totsuka was cute. Totsukacute.

After that, the white one piece clothed spirit would completely crawl out from the screen. Every time, Totsuka would swallow his breath and let out a small shriek.

But I had to say, this movie was pretty scary. At this rate, I had the feeling I'd be jumping straight into Totsuka's route instead of just veering off the path and it's frightening. If he ended up clinging onto me all of a sudden, my waist was definitely going to give in. I'd be leaning over even.

My heart ran amok while my blood violently acted up like the muddy streams in a tempest. In the worst case scenario, I had to prepare the ATM. Huh? Wasn't it ETC? EVA? Well, whatever. The movie's almost finished anyway.

To get my mind out of the gutter about Totsuka, I surveyed the interior of the auditorium. I honestly wanted to just count prime numbers to calm down, but since I was aiming for a private school for liberal arts, I wasn't sure if zero was included, so I gave up.

The air-conditioned auditorium was chilly to the bone and also considerably dark. It's the most optimal environment for watching a horror movie.

In the end, I was completely confused as to what the movie was by the time the ending credits played.

We watched the playing projector all the way until the very and Totsuka and I stood up.

With lingering thoughts of the movie, we leisurely walked out of the movie theater.

"That was pretty fun! I was screaming the entire time, so my threat's really dry."

"Yeah, same here."

There was this weird tension that caused me to get a parched throat, but locked shoulders as well.

We walked with the crowd that flowed out of the building towards the stairs outside.

The sun that had finally came down was obstructed by the buildings and a refreshing wind blew by in the shade.

"Want to take a quick break?"

I pointed at the cafe we were descending down towards and Totsuka nodded.

Although plenty of the people who had exited the movie together with us also entered the cafe, there were still enough seats for the two of us. We went right to the counter and quickly made our orders.

"Um, ice coffee."

"Oh, I'll take one, too."

“Indeed, I, too, shall take an ice coffee.”

The three of us didn’t have to wait for very long since we all ordered ice coffees and occupied the nearby seats after we received our drinks.

First, I kept my coffee black so I could enjoy its original aroma and taste. Its sharp bitterness made me wide awake. After that, I added a portion of milk and gum syrup. Combining these two created a Black RX. Yep, the sweeter the better!

Once we moistened our throats, the three of us breathed out.

The *three* of us?

“…Wait a second.”

“Eh?”

“Mm?”

Don’t “mm?” me. I’m talking about you.

An intruder resembling a bear gowned in a coat was present as if it’s a natural thing to do. Right. That’s what he felt like.

“Uh, who were you again? Shinkiba-kun?”

“It’s Zaimokuza-kun, Hachiman.”

Totsuka seriously responded to me…

“Okay, Zaimoku, Zaimokuya, whatever, where the heck did you come from? Are you like one of those bugs, you know, the bugs called maize weevil or something?”

How about carpet beetles, then?

Zaimokuza intently sucked at his straw and then lifted his face.

“Fumu. I thought I would name myself after seeing the both of you at the theater, but upon following you two, I had arrived here. Indeed, it seems my optical camouflage is in perfect shape today as well.”

“I’m pretty sure everyone’s just pretending not to see you.”

At the very least, I couldn’t see him because Totsuka was the only one I was focused on.

“Hey Zaimokuza-kun, long time no see.”

“I-Indeed. Mohahaha!” said Zaimokuza, laughing nervously when Totsuka spoke to him. Then again, Totsuka’s really something to just take everything so naturally… Well, if he could talk to someone like me, I suppose he could with Zaimokuza.

“Were you watching the movie?”

“Indeed. But it was quite the blunder, I would say. Not a single trace that makes Japanese horrors unique. It seemed oddly Americanized. It also lost its appeal and was just a pitiful and garbage movie, a result of dumbing it down for the masses. Ooph! But in my case, although I stated that I watch horror movies, I did not mean the movies that were given the Hollywood treatment for the enjoyment of the masses, but movies that adapted literary pieces as strange that may make me. I suppose it’s the influence of Lafcadio Hearn. Dooph! I went a bit far there with the deep knowledge. How pompous of me, fokanupo! It is as if I look like an otaku. But I certainly am not, kopo!!”[36]

And there he goes… The thing about these chunibyos was that they always seemed to be strangely knowledgeable about occult stuff, so it’s a real pain. Literary works from Koizumi Yakumo and Izumi Kyouoka or folklore pieces from Yanagida Kunio and Orikuchi were things they had barely understood, yet they had the sad habit of flaunting their limited knowledge of them.

I stopped listening to Zaimokuza halfway through his speech, but Totsuka was properly listening to him. It wouldn’t be weird if that kindness started charging people.

“You think so? I actually kinda liked it.”

“Indeed, as do I.”

“Ehh!?”

He flipped sides within a moment’s notice. His change was so fast that he looked like he was glowing. “Wow, you’re amazing. You were like one of those self-important politicians just now…”

“Quiet you. Hachiman, what are you thoughts on the movie?”

“Pretty flash and easy to understand, I guess. It’s another story if we’re talking about how interesting it was though.”

Although I was looking only at Totsuka part way into the movie, I still had a general gist of what it was about.

“Uh huh. You know how like the ghost would just pop out of the scream like ‘BAM!’? That was really crazy and it totally scared me! I thought I was going to have a heart attack.”

Exactly my thoughts on how I was feeling right now. As I watched Totsuka flail his hands around and try his best to reenact the scenes of the movie, it felt like my heart was going to overwork itself and stop.

“Well, as one who can no longer feel fear, it was nothing. Compared to ‘that person who must not be named’[37], that person is much more frightenfoy!” Zaimokuza trembled midway into his sentence. You’re acting like Malfoy when he remembered the fears of Voldemort, you know. For him to be frightened this much, I could only think of one person; Yukinoshita.

“Yeah, that’s true. Yukinoshita’s definitely scarier compared to the movie.”

“Hachiman, that’s not very nice. I mean, sure, at first, um, she’s a little scary, but…” Totsuka warned me with an initial indignant look, but his voice grew weaker. “Maybe because she’s always so serious and earnest that she seems scary.”

“Brutal honesty can be frightening, too. You won’t know kind of things they’ll say to you.”

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[36] Japanese copy pasta that has to deal with otaku speak that stemmed from The Melancholy of Suzumiya Haruhi.

[37] Harry Potter

Well, whether it was a movie or something else, seeing the same things didn't mean having the same impressions.

At most, they'd be similar.

But to be similar meant there was something definitely different.

We always looked at the things we only wanted to see.

Interpretations was defined only by the numbers of people, whether if it was for the impressions of a movie or of a person.

That's why it's ridiculous to understand them, or even try to. It's a sin and an evil to think you had understood.

But unless we acted as if we understood something, we wouldn't be able to live.

Understanding and being understood by someone would cause the both of you two have a mutual, vague realization of each other; either that, you'd be unable to live on unless you redefined that person every time and talked about it.

Otherwise, your "self" would disappear like thin air.

That "self" was vague and uncertain. Just like the phenomenon of gestaltzerfall, the more you thought about something, the less you understood it.

Every time you stopped understanding, you'd gather all sorts of information again and construct an image of yourself and the other person. It resembled simulacrum; no matter what you constructed, the only images you'd have were child and primitive ones.

That's what I'd call horror.

I felt sudden chills in the air-conditioned store. I buckled my shoulders in and held back my shivering.

I carried my glass to my mouth and it turned out I had emptied it out at some point. I placed it back down in resignation and Zaimokuza opened his mouth. "However, it was a good breather. Now I can concentrate on my manuscript. Ah, yes, Hachiman. D-Do you want to read it?"

He glanced at me while blushing slightly. *That's not cute.*

"Only if it's completed. You actually have it with you right now?"

"Fumu, of course. An author is one who can write wherever and whenever. At all times, I have my laptop loaded with Pomera, tablet, smartphone, and my writing utensils on my person."

Oh yeah, you totally get people like that, by just having equipment on them, they get motivated.

Totsuka admirably looked at Zaimokuza who was acting needlessly conceited. "Oh, so that means Zaimokuza-kun's always working hard, huh?"

"Who knows if he actually is."

Zaimokuza could say he was, but he definitely wasn't. He's basically someone who'd act like an author and argue over literary pieces, but never actually write a manuscript himself. I had to warn Totsuka that he wasn't a target of admiration. While we're at it, it might be better to stab him with a kitchen knife, too.

Perceiving my disrespectful attitude, Zaimokuza turned upset. “Hapon. Pompous fool. I don’t need the likes of you to say that. Have a look at yourself Hachiman, I wager you are not doing anything yourself.”

“Mm, you got that right. The only thing I’m doing is taking summer courses. I’m also doing a research project, too.”

“Huh? Did we have an assignment like that?” said Totsuka with a flustered tone. Judging by his reaction, he must’ve been taking it easy after finishing all his assignments.

“No, it’s for my little sister.”

“For Komachi-chan? Oh, okay. You’re such a nice older brother, Hachiman.”

“Not really. Actual nice older brothers would leave their little sisters to fend for themselves.”

“So, what are you researching?”

“I’m just collecting stuff from the internet and compiling them together.”

“Huh? Is that all she needs?”

“Fumu. Since it is merely a research project, that should suffice for her needs. As a matter of fact, pouring all your tears and effort into it would only cause your surroundings to incriminate you.”

“Right, right. Komachi’s a girl, too. Supposedly you’re better off if you don’t take seriously.”

Komachi’s one and only request was that “it didn’t stand out from everyone else”. Hey, hey, what kind of cruel order were you giving me when I stood out more than Dhalsim who was floating? I could even float more than him to the point I’d be called a “Space Brother”…

But now that I think about it, when I got really into my own research project, I recall a bunch of snickering from my surroundings. I really wish they’d stop doing that near the lockers at the back of class.

“But doing stuff like that is pretty hard. I can’t think of things off the top of my head so easily,” said Totsuka, feeling a little nostalgic.

When you’re told that anything’s fine, it’s a tall order to actually think of something on the spot. *Who do you think we are, Inventor Boy Kanipan?*

“I suppose those are the times where they put your IQ to the test. They are not simply asking about your scholastic ability, but your ability to invent.”

“That sounds like something you’d be good at, Zaimokuza-kun. I mean, you’re aiming to be a writer, after all.”

“He doesn’t seem like he has a high IQ, though.”

“Homun, indeed, if anything, I am the type to have a higher EQ. I am rich in sensitivities.”

EQ, or as they called it, was your emotional intelligence quotient.

This was my personal opinion, but whenever someone brought up EQ in a conversation about IQ, without exception, they had a low IQ. If the person brought up ET, then he’s Spielberg. By the way, if it’s ED, then that person was Pele.

“Oh yeah, there were people with Mini 4WD’s, too. They were saying they were going to build them.”

The moment I mentioned that, Zaimokuza’s body jumped. For some reason, he was beginning to sweat. *What the, is he some kind of Japanese toad?*

“Eh. Ehh!? Um, H-H-H-Hachiman, did we go to the same elementary school?”

“Am I really hearing that from you…? Actually, don’t start acting normal from something that trivial.”

Though if I had to choose, I’d prefer he go back to his nest.

“I used to play with Mini 4WDs, too.”

“That’s surprising…”

“Ehh? Why’s that? I’m a boy too, you know.” Totsuka chuckled.

I tried to imagine what Totsuka had looked like when he was younger, but for some reason, only an image of him wearing a hat with a T-shirt and spats came to mind. I’m sure he was cute in the past. Whoa, let’s correct that. He’s also cute now. If he was cute in the past and cute now, we should enter him in the Tales of Times Now Past and teach that in the school curriculum.

“Hamon. But none can match my Broken G. After all, I had equipped him with an authentic iron hammer. Any opponent who faces it head on will be destroyed without fail.”

“That sounds like a completely idiotic thing to do… Tch, I-I guess I’m not one to talk since I attached a cutter on my Big Spider…”

I also attached a marking pin from a sewing set on my Ray Stinger.

“That’s dangerous you two.” Totsuka rebuked us and Zaimokuza and I exchanged looks.

“It’s okay, I only fiddle and play with it by myself.”

“Indeed. Loners hurt no one, only themselves.”

“No hurting yourself either.”

“Okay…”

With him staring at us so intently, we earnestly reflected on our actions.

“I-Indeed… B-But I can do maintenance as well! Against others, it can go as fast as the wind!”

I snorted at his declaration. “…Hah. You really think you can win against me? Against my Big Spider? Outfitted with one-way wheels that are small in diameter, reston sponge tires, torque tuned super rapid gears, an opened body that combines air cooling and lightness, and for the times its cornered, its equipped with a stabilizer ball so it can react with high speed as well as a convertible aluminum down-thrust roller! Its speed goes beyond theory!”

I never actually tried it though. I mean, they wouldn’t let me buy a track… I tried making a track out of cardboard instead, but the car would get stuck on the packing tape and wouldn’t run right.

Zaimokuza made an unrivaled smile after listening to me. “Ku, ku, ku, an aluminum convertible is the height of ignorance… That extra mass will be fatal.”

“Talk more. My Big Spider shows its strength by having a stable lower center of gravity.”

“Hoh… Shall we duel to see who comes out on top?”

Zaimokuza and I sent each other aggressive glares. I was on the verge of going, “Go get him! Magnuuuuum!” while thrusting out my fish. Wait, that’s the Galactia Magnum, wasn’t it?

We both glared at each other in silence, but an unthinkable voice destroyed the silence.

“Oh, that sounds fun! It’s been a while for me, but I want to try too. My Avante was pretty fast, you know?”

““Avante!?””

What’s with the difference in our generations!? His choice was really tasteful on top of that! He didn’t belong to the Boomerang or the Emperor factions!

…But I suppose having different generations was possible.

It’s been quite a few years since I had played with my mini 4WDs when I was younger, but I still had that fiery passion in me today. I even swung my umbrella like a sword whenever the rain stopped, the world of fiction having been saved numerous times.

And that’s why, even when I became an adult, I’d remember it all.

Even if our generations were different, deep down, there were things that wouldn’t change.

And so, my time as a boy would never end.

One day...
Mobile talk
Hachiman&
Zaimokuza

zaimokuza's mobile

FROM Zaimokuza 23:32
TITLE nontitle
Fumu. Regarding my manuscript, I will send you a mail with it attached, OK?

FROM MAILER-DAEMON 23:32
TITLE Returned mail:see transcript for details
This Message was undeliverable due to the following reason...

FROM Zaimokuza
TITLE nontitle
He changed his address, you say!? Hachiman! Hachimaaaaaaaan!

FROM MAILER-DAEMON
TITLE Returned mail:see transcript
This Message was undeliverable
following reason...

Regrettably, no one knows where Hiratsuka Shizuka's red thread leads to.

What was the greatest food of them all?

Curry, shabu shabu, sushi, soba, sukiyaki, tempura, yakiniku, or sweets?

The answer: none of them.

Why? Because ramen was the greatest of them all.

Ramen.

It's one of the many delicacies that any high school boy would find to be their greatest companion.

First thing that came to mind when you worried about what to eat? Ramen.

Looking to stop by a ramen shop after school? Acceptable.

Looking to find a new store after a little shopping? Acceptable.

Looking to make some ramen and slurp the soup late at night out of hunger? Acceptable.

But going to a ramen shop for a date as a couple?

Unacceptable.

Quit running your mouths at the counter. You guys do realize there are going to be people using those afterwards, right? Go do mushy stuff like that at your favorite Starbucks. Stop blabbering about your love stories at the counter of a ramen shop. Please, please think of the people who have to stand behind you and listen to that.

You know what ramen was originally? It was something meant to be eaten alone.

The soup would get cold and the noodles would get soggy if all you did was chat.

That explained why Ichiran's "Taste Focus System"—a system where every seat is partitioned into its own section and your front was covered with a banner that obscured your view of the inner kitchen—was a huge invention in the ramen world. Long ago, they had "Currently applying for a patent" written down, but I wonder if they managed get that patent.

I digress.

Basically, ramen was befitting for someone of my stature.

One supreme bowl that cured my noble soul that abides by isolation.

They called it, ramen.

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I missed my lunch time because I woke up later than I should have, a situation I often found myself in during this summer vacation.

Since I was aiming to become a full-time house husband, this was where I should be making my own food.

People who thought that were naive.

Real housewives would hand their husbands five hundred yen for their lunch and spend the rest of their husband's money for a luxurious meal of their own. This may be prejudice on my part. But that's the kind of house husband I wanted to become. I also wanted to take the settlement money after a divorce.

With aspirations to become a full-time house husband, I emulated the aforementioned housewives and decided to go out for a luxurious lunch. Recently, I was wealthy due to my alchemy which utilized my prep school scholarship money. I was the Small Money Alchemist.

Let's get ramen for lunch today. Now that I had decided on my choice of food, my stomach wasn't in the mood for anything but said choice.

Chiba was home to a competitive marketplace for ramen.

The contested marketplace existed at the stations of Matsudo, Chiba, Tsudanuma, and Motoyawata. Recently, B-grade gourmet ramen shops such as Takeoka-styled Ramen and Katsuura Tantan

Men had joined the fray, making it a nationally known hot spot.

Such "stores that people knew" were exceptionally stable, but once you became used to them, you had to go out and search for a store of your own.

Whenever you ate out with someone, you had to match your preferences with theirs, making you say pretentious stuff like, "Hey man, I know this good place, awesome eh? Fuhihi." This made you unable to embark on adventures like an adventurer.

But alone, you could enter a store without having to be mindful of those courtesies. That adventurous spirit was what led you to new discoveries and the development of your own culinary finesse.

In other words, a loner was always surging with the frontier spirit and was a modern-day adventurer with the vigor and spirit of a challenger.

As such, for today, I had settled for a ramen shop in the neighborhood which I had barely embarked to. Just like what they say about how the hardest thing to see was right under your nose, striking at your reachable blind spots was a marvelous strategy. It's reverse psychology against the logic of people from Tokyo who didn't go to Tokyo Tower.

For some moments, the bus shook back and forth.

After arriving at my destination, Kaihin Makuhari, I walked. Nothing but walking.

Since this area was somewhere I'd wander around aimlessly on my way home from school, there was a store I had set my eyes on for a while now, a new store that I had wanted to explore.
I trudgingly walked to the store while being baked by the rays of the summer sun.

The damp humidity was irritating, but as if blowing it away, a refreshing timbre filled the area.

Originating from the bell of a church were high-pitched rings.

This area was populated with lines of expensive hotels with many wedding halls. At one of those halls, a wedding ceremony was being held.

A florid atmosphere dominated the surroundings and coming from past the fences were voices screaming their blessings.

This was actually my first time seeing a wedding, so I decided to take a peek.

In doing so, I saw happiness as though it was physically visualized onto a picture. But, hmm, I could see some kind of black smudge at the corner of my vision…

I rubbed my eyelids and strained my eyes for a better look. Pay no heed to a single point, view everything without looking, and that is what it means "to see"… I obeyed the teachings of Takuwan Oshou[38] and gazed closer at the black smudge.

That silhouette was coated in black and was the only one exuding the aura of a loser. And right now, those black colors were absorbing the light from its surroundings, warping even the rays of the sun. Within that sphere of happiness, just a single area was enwrapped with a conviction that resembled a grudge. Not to mention, it was murmuring in a low voice, "Go to hell, aaaamen…"[39]

Yeah, that's definitely someone I knew…

"Now if only you could hurry up and get married already."

"I'm sure it'll be Shizuka-chan's turn next!"

"Hey Shizuka-chan, I managed to find another good person. I'm sure it'll go well this time, so do you want to try meeting him?"

"Shizuka. You see, dad's already putting money aside for our grandchildren…"

For every comment she was given, that blot of blackness would shake. Her spiritual pressure[40]… disappeared…?

I think I might've witnessed something I wasn't supposed to. I promptly removed my gaze and started walking off as though I hadn't seen anything.

But one mustn't forget.

—When looking into the depths of the abyss, the abyss, too, was looking back at you…

"Hi-Hikigaya!"

Suddenly, the black blot screamed out my name.

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[38] A character from Vagabond based on Takuan Sougo

[39] Lyrics from a single by Sugar, "Wedding Bell"

[40] Bleach

The older married couple near its voice gave me inspecting looks. I instinctively bowed back. And then they returned it with their own. *What the heck, does this count as meeting the parents, too? Is my only choice here to take responsibility and get married…?*

The black blot turned around to the married couple and rapidly said,, "O-Oh, that's a problem child over there! I-I have my job to get to, s-so I'll be leaving now!"

The blot ran towards me with her kneels hitting the ground.

"Hikigaya! You came at a good time! You're a life saver!" said the black blot. On closer inspection, the blot was a beautiful older lady clad in a black dress. She grabbed my hand and we left the area.

"Huh? wait a second, excuse me…"

When a beautiful older lady grabbed your hand, what other choice could you take except to obediently go along with her?

For a short period, we continued to walk. As soon as we made the turn at a corner into a park, we finally stopped.

"Phew… Looks like we got away for now…"

The lady massaged her chest as she breathed out a sigh of relief.

Her black party dressed formed an elegant arc with the lines of her body and a fur neck wrap was wrapped around her pale nape. Her tied up hair was glossy black as if it was arranged with her dress. The hand that grabbed me wore a black glove that matched her dress was surprisingly soft.

"Um…"

"Hm? Ahh, my apologies. Caught you off guard, didn't I?"

The stylish looking beauty smiled and brought me to the bench. She then took out a cigarette from her bag and began tapping it to tighten it.

It was the gesture of an old man contrary to her appearance.

She ignited her hundred yen lighter and slowly lit up her cigarette.

I was completely flabbergasted from how completely different she looked moments earlier, but there's no way I could mistake her now.

Hiratsuka Shizuka, the advisor of the Service Club.

Ohh, she's actually really beautiful if she took the time to dress up…

"Um, is it okay for you to leave like that? Wasn't it a wedding ceremony?"

"I'm sure they won't mind. I left my congratulations gift with them."

"Won't there be an after-party or something?"

"What's with you? Being awfully considerate, aren't we?"

"No, it's an important occasion, isn't it?"

"…Phew. It's my cousin's ceremony, so they won't need me." Hiratsuka-sensei sadly averted her gaze and with the cigarette in her mouth, she mumbled further. "It's not like I wanted to go in the first place. I have to deal with my younger cousins acting considerate, my aunts always talking about marriage, and my noisy parents… It just isn't worth giving a congratulations gift if I have to hear my relatives complaining…"

She spat out her cigarette with a long, long sigh and crushed it in her hand.

There's not much I can say now…

When it got strangely quiet, Hiratsuka-sensei turned the mood around and asked, "So, what were you doing around there?"

"I was on my way to get some ramen."

"Ramen, huh? Why didn't I think of that?" said Hiratsuka-sensei with a sudden burst in energy. The eyes which were dead earlier were now brimming with life.

"Speak of the devil, with all that reception I had to deal with, I ended up missing my lunch… Great timing, I'll go with you."

"Right, I guess I don't mind."

Mmkay, here I'd do the leading, so I started walking. Hiratsuka-sensei followed behind me, her heels noisily tapping the floor. *Then again, this person's appearance is really flashy! Just look at how much attention she's getting!*

When we got out into the street that was moderately congested, gazes from the people there were directed at us. With how gaudy she looked, well, also being beautiful and all, you just couldn't help but look.

The person in question , however, didn't seem to mind as she spoke to me like normal. "I heard you gave some advice to a future underclassmen. I didn't think you'd actually continue your regular Service Club duties over the break, I'm impressed."

"You've got it wrong. How'd you know that anyway…?"

Now that's just frightening how you found out…

"I was informed by your younger sister."

"Just when did you two get so close…?"

Komachi's encirclement that involved my acquaintances wasn't anything to laugh at.

Wasn't this the ABCD encirclement now? Should I be worried? A for "a dumb girl" Yuigahama, B for the "berserker Hiratsuka-sensei", C for the "cute Komachi!", and D for "don't know, who was that again?" Kawa-something-san… If we're getting economically sanctioned, we'd better resist back with a sanctioned mentality.

"She's a nice sister. Sometimes, I think it'd be nice to have a sister like that. Oh, I didn't mean anything deeper by that."

"Considering your age difference, if things go wrong, you'd end up more like a mom and daughter, blah, blah…"

"Hikigaya…"

Crap, she's going to smack me… I reflexively closed my eyes and readied my body.

But a fist didn't come at me. I opened my eyes in curiosity and Hiratsuka-sensei was depressed.

"That kind of joke hurts right now…"

"I-I'm sorry!"

Someone hurry! Someone hurry and take her! If no one doesn't take her, I'll end up taking her! Someone please do something about her.

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It's nearing the end of August, but it's still a bit hot to be walking outside, what with my frying skin under the sun.

But with the wind blowing through this area that faced the street along the coast, I felt somewhat cool.

That made standing outside the store more comfortable than it could've been.

It's going to take a little longer until we could enter the store, but since I was good at killing time, It wasn't a problem. I was also good at shaming others as well as popping bubble wrap. Based on the aforementioned, I anticipate that once I entered society, I'd be a skillful newbie crusher, but since they'd be too pitiful, I will definitely not work.

I did some human observation and I could see a guy at the front desperately speaking in a loud voice, two apparently male college students giving off the mood of a male and female couple dating, and so forth. After giving up on that, this time, I tried imagining a situation like so: "If I managed to start up a ramen business and TV stations come to me for interviews, how should I answer them?"

…For now, I planned on introducing my technique as a secret skill passed down, through a line of ancestry, dubbing it the "Tsubame Gaeshi" where I'd fiercely shake the noodles dry, horizontally and vertically. And after my store became popular, I'd open a ramen cram school, wring money out of the people aiming to get away from the salarymen life to start up a business.

As I thought about those worthless things, I could hear a soft sigh that resembled a laugh.

"…What is it?"

I gave the owner of the sigh, Hiratsuka-sensei, a reproachful look and she opened her mouth with a wry smile. "It's nothing, I was just a little surprised. I was under the impression you hated crowds and lines."

"I do. Chaotic crowds, that is. As for lines, well, I'm lining up properly, see? I'm not some line-cutting idiot."

In reality, I wasn't all that bad with lines. I think the reason why most people disliked lines was because it either felt like a waste of time, they weren't getting much done by standing around, or that they couldn't hold a proper conversation when they were with someone. If we considered the urban legend of how couples would break up when going to Destinyland, weren't these kinds of lines the cause of their different sense of values and irritation coming to light?

So in regards to that, I was blessed with stupid amounts of time and would never get bored because of my excessive ability to think; I basically moved independently. My heart of steel wouldn't waver from something insignificant as a line.

As for chaotic crowds, they were full of lawless and uncivilized beasts and I just couldn't stand watching them nearby or even have them come near me.

"You're a surprisingly clean individual, aren't you?" said Hiratsuka-sensei, surprised after my remark.

"That's not true. I'm not very good when it comes to cleaning."

My room was in fact dirty. If you titled my room with "Urbanization" or "The Future of Earth", it'd be grounds for a posthumous evaluation.

"I'm not talking about your cleanliness or your hygiene, but your ethics. Of course, those ethics are simply just what you have internally."

"Isn't that technically calling me a selfish and egocentric chump?"

"I'm actually praising you. It's good that you've developed the proper sense to evaluate things."

She put me on the spot when she gave me a charming look. I mean, I never really had that intention in the first place. I looked away and mumbled, "I really just don't like noisy people…"

"Let's have fun, this is the moment we're shining the most!" Exactly who were they saying that to and who were they trying to promote themselves to?

Those who knew the joys of peace like quietly reading a book alone or playing games at home could somehow see the futility of their self-promotion for fun was.

I hated the people who mistakenly believed they could measure enjoyment based on the loudness of their voice and the number of people they were grouped with despite how wrong that was. And as if huge crowds and events were the best times to show off, they'd become even more active. It's unbearable watching people deceive and lie to themselves.

Why couldn't they validate their own enjoyment and correctness by themselves?

The reason why you couldn't stand proud was because you weren't confident. Somewhere inside of you, your collected self would pose you the question, "Is this really enjoyable? To push that question away, you'd put these things into words like, "They're fun", "Things are getting exciting", "Right now's the best", and so forth. You'd say it aloud. And then, you'd raise your voice and scream it out.

People like them weren't people I wanted to get involved with. I didn't want to turn into a self-deceiving hypocrite.

"It sounds like you won't be attending the fireworks festival then."

Hiratsuka-sensei's words cut my train of thought.

"Fireworks festival?"

"Yeah. You know about it, right? It's the one being held at the port tower. Aren't you going?"

When she brought it up, it made me realize. If it's the fireworks festival by the port tower, then it's Chiba's summer tradition. I've gone to it before when I was younger. But at the time, my attention was more focused on the night stands than the fireworks themselves.

But living in this area meant you could already see fireworks shot from the stadium, heck, Destinyland was shooting fireworks all year round, so it wasn't all that much of a blessing.

"I don't have any particular plans on going, but what about you, sensei?" I asked.

She let out a long sigh. "I suppose you can call it my job over summer vacation. But it's more accurate to say I'm going to watch people instead of the fireworks…"

I gave her a look requesting an explanation as to what in the world she was talking about.

"I've been put in charge of watching over students. That includes during festivals and the sort. But actual jobs like these tend to be left to the young folk. Gosh, there wasn't much I can do about that, hahaha. After all, see, I'm young."

"Why do you look so happy…?"

Hiratsuka-sensei was in a good mood and continued as if she didn't hear my mumble. "If any of our students happen to get out of hand, that would be a problem. Since the festival is a municipal event, there'll be quite a few VIPs present as well."

"VIPs, huh?"

"That's right, families like the Yukinoshita should be attending."

Indeed, the Yukinoshitas were essentially local celebrities and were a family of a high pedigree. They had a seat in the prefectural assembly as well as owned a local business. So it's possible they had provided assistance with the event. In that case, it wouldn't be out of the question if they were invited.

"Speaking of them, was Haruno-san a former student?"

"Hm? Ahh. That's correct. I believe she was on her way out when you enrolled. She's a graduate of our Sobu High. I remember her quite well."

If she graduated when I entered the school, that meant we were three years apart. So Haruno-san was either nineteen or twenty years old. *She graduated two years ago, huh…?*

"Generally speaking, her grades were at the top and she was able to finish anything that was thrown at her. And considering her appearance, she was more or less treated as a goddess by the boys."

It sounded like the story of an entirely different person. If anything, she's more of a witch than a goddess. A goddess and a witch. Perhaps they were once equal entities, but by way of religion, they were divided between right and wrong. It was the epitome of those two's image.

"But," said Hiratsuka-sensei, pausing. With an unpleasant face, she continued. "She wasn't an exceptional student."

"It sounds like she was though?"

"She's exceptional. But that's only in regards to her grades. She was noisy in class, her uniform was a mess, and you'd always find her at festivals like the upcoming one. You could say she was gallivanting around. But that's also why she had many friends."

—Ahh, I could easily imagine seeing her like that. As someone colorful and selfish as her, her free nature was what caused people to be attracted to her.

"Of course, that's also…" She stopped abruptly.

I continued her sentence. "That's also just a front, right?"

"Hoh, so you noticed?" Hiratsuka-sensei looked impressed, or rather, she had a smile that she'd make when she shared a negative feeling about something.

"I can tell just by looking."

"Impressive observation skills."

Pretty much. It's my gifted education for scumbags I received from my pops.

"However, that front of hers is one of Haruno's charming points. Those who notice that front start to think fondly of her conniving and determined nature."

"Is that what you call being charismatic?" I said.

Hiratsuka-sensei nodded. "When she served as the Planning Commmittee Chairperson for the Cultural Festival, we had the biggest student turnout. Not just students, but even the faculty got involved… She also got me to play the bass for her."

Sensei grimaced, remembering something unpleasant. Upon mentioning it, her hair style did resemble a certain bassist's hair. I thought we were talking about Some-On Club[41] or something…

"But the sisters sure seem awfully different from each other though."

If Yukinoshita resembled a graduate student that was devoted to her research, Haruno-san was like a university student that was overly aware (lol) about a lot of things.

By the way, I loathed phrases like "overly aware", "get excited", "involve everyone", and the like the most. The normalfags (lol) totally loved to spout stuff like that. They really need to stop using those packed phrases so much because it made them look weak.

Hiratsuka-sensei nodded, crossing her arms to think. "That's true… But I won't say she should become like Haruno. She should just be herself and work on her good points."

"Good points…"

"I told you before, how she's kind and correct."

In the past, Hiratsuka-sensei certainly did evaluate Yukinoshita Yukino as such. On top of that, she stated that it was difficult for her to live like that because the world wasn't kind or correct.

Yukinoshita was by and large correct. As for whether she was kind or not, I still had my doubts, but you couldn't say she wasn't kind just because she wasn't soft.

It's fine not to be nice to me since I'd rather you just spoil me. The idea that being strict was a form of kindness? No thank you…

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[41] K-On's Akiyama Mio

Oh right, this person thinks like this too… I thought, and when I glanced at Hiratsuka-sensei, she was looking at me with a warm gaze. “You’re the same as well.”

She smiled at me, but I asked her for the meaning of that.

“What’s the same?”

“You’re also kind and correct except that your kindness and correctness is incompatible with Yukinoshita’s.”

It’s my first time being told something like that. But I wasn’t happy at all. After all, I had always believed in my own kindness and correctness. Th-That’s why, i-it’s not like I was happy or anything!

“Isn’t incompatible correctness just a contradiction? You know what Conan-kun says all the time, that there’s always only one truth.”

“Unfortunately for you, I ‘m more of the Future Boy one, not the famous detective,” said Hiratsuka-sensei, making a grin while warding off my attempt to hide my embarrassment.

Just how old is this person really?

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Once we were finally able to enter the store, we purchased meal tickets from the ticket machine.

I demonstrated my mentality of ladies first and allowed Hiratsuka-sensei to go ahead. When going somewhere dangerous or somewhere you didn’t know for the first time, you had to ensure it’s safe by letting the women go first!

Hiratsuka-sensei pressed a button without a second thought. She was so manly that I thought I was going to fall in love. After buying the ticket, she turned around to me with her wallet still gripped in her hand. *Um, could you move already?*

“What would you like?”

Don’t tell me she wants to treat me? Now I wanted to call her big bro. As much as I was grateful for her gesture, it didn’t seem proper to accept it.

“N-No, I can pay for myself.”

“Don’t be modest.”

“No, I mean, there isn’t a reason for you treat me ,” I said.

Hiratsuka-sensei tilted her head curiously. “Hm? I was under the impression you were the kind of trash rotten enough to think it’s natural for women to pay for you…”

What a horrible thing to say.

“That’s just being a leech… What I want to be is a full-time house husband!”

“I-I don’t get the difference…”

Hiratsuka-sensei looked confused, but I didn't know the difference very well either. But hey, being a full-time house husband sounded a lot better than being a leech, right? Anyway, a teacher paying for a specific student's meal didn't sound like a good thing to me. Refusing her offer here would be good luck.

Similarly to Hiratsuka-sensei, I selected tonkatsu, went to the counter and sat. Hiratsuka-sensei handed out her meal ticket and stated the firmness of her noodles.

"Kona-otoshi please."

"Ah, I'll take hari-gane then," I said, following her. But you know… *Do women really order so smoothly like this at a ramen shop?*

But there's just something charming about seeing a stylish beauty at a ramen shop.

We were getting an unusual amount of attention, but Hiratsuka-sensei didn't look particularly concerned about it as she prepared the provided paper apron with an excited look and confirmed the positions of the pepper, sesame seeds, leaf mustard, and red ginger. *Hey, seriously? This woman's getting way too into this…*

They quickly got our orders of ramen to us since it seemed like it didn't take long to boil our noodles.

Hiratsuka-sensei took the wooden chopsticks and placed her hands together. "Thank you for the food."

"Thank you for the food."

First, the soup. A film of oil covered the ramen's surface and appeared as smooth as white porcelain, showing you how creamy it was. The pot herbs canceled out the smell and the tonkatsu soup was thick and rich.

Next, the noodles. For how thick the soup was, the noodles were thin and straight. The balance between the texture of the firm noodles and their chewiness was good.

"Yep, delicious."

We both expressed our simplistic impressions and then slurped our noodles in silence, savoring the soup. The crisp texture of the wood ear mushrooms and the green onions made the taste all the more wonderful.

When Hiratsuka-sensei asked for another serving of noodles with only a fourth of it left, she spoke to me. "About our talk earlier…"

"Yes?"

"The talk about your cleanliness."

When the noodle serving came, she added the leaf mustard. Feeling excited as she customized the taste to her liking, Hiratsuka-sensei had a smile. "I believe there'll be a day when it can be accepted."

"Right…" I responded reluctantly as I tossed the raw garlic.

"It's like this ramen." Hiratsuka-sensei proudly showed her completed Shizuka special ramen and continued. "When you're young, you think tonkatsu ramen is the best and the fat is delicious. You can't accept anything except for kotteri soup, but once you grow up, you start to slowly allow for salt ramen and soy sauce ramen."

"I-Isn't that just becoming old…"

"What was that?"

"Nothing…"

She gave me a nasty glare…

Hiratsuka-sensei looked upset for a moment, but suddenly relaxed. "Well, that's fine… It's fine if you're not accepted now. If some day you are, then that's good enough."

Perhaps, she had understood my problems and my misgivings. But even so, she wasn't spelling out the answer for me. Although for my current self, there wasn't anything I could answer.

"Of course, it's not like everything will be accepted. I hate tomatoes, so I still can't accept tomato noodles today."

"So you hate tomatoes…"

"Indeed, I just can't get used to that mushy sensation and that unique smell."

Is she a child? But I could understand what she's trying to say. That stickiness in those kinds of fruits were probably equal to torture for people who hated it. It's kind of grotesque and all.

"I also hate cucumbers for a similar reason."

"I don't like cucumbers either…"

I liked Bannanchiten Kiryu[42], though. I also liked Pepsi Cucumber.

"But the thing with cucumbers is that when you sprinkle them all over potato salads or sandwiches, it gives them that cucumber taste…"

It's okay to add cucumber to miso soup. But raw cucumber should be avoided. It's the moment when they were cut into round slices that they bared their fangs… They'd dye all the flavors with the taste of cucumbers. On top of that, the nutritional values weren't all that much, so they were like predators of the vegetable world.

"I like pickled vegetables, however…" Hiratsuka-sensei expressed a drunk-like opinion. I was also of the same opinion.

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[42] Mamotte Shugogetten

“I like them like you, too.”

Yep, that’s true. Pickled vegetables were good. They were very refreshing delicacies. And the fact you could just gobble them up with pure white rice was bliss.

“……”

The conversation halted for some reason and there was silence. I looked at Hiratsuka-sensei out of curiosity and she was spacing out. When our eyes met, she gulped her water in a fluster.

“Ah, y-you mean the pickled vegetables. R-Right. I-I also like them.”

“…Um, it’s kind of embarrassing when you say it so awkwardly like that, please stop.”

“J-Just what are you talking about !? Then again… what the heck did I even want to talk about…?”

Is this person okay? Maybe you should exercise your brain by filling out a ten by ten multiplication table. Let’s anti-age! I couldn’t remember what we were talking about except for cucumbers myself though.

Hiratsuka-sensei’s mood turned better and she casually lifted her chopsticks. “Here, have a pork fillet.”

“Thank you. I’ll give you my bamboo shoots then.”

“Fufu, thank you.”

“Considering your age and all, you should take your dietary fibers.”

“Don’t say more than you need to.”

“Ouch.” I rubbed my head after she hit me as I ate my ramen.

Looking satisfied from the taste of this store, Hiratsuka-sensei smiled. “Since you showed me a delicious store like this, I feel like I need to take you along somewhere myself.”

“Do you have a recommendation?”

“I certainly do. Back when I was a student, I was out on a conquest for all the ramen shops in the Chiba neighborhood. But it may be a bit strange for a student and teacher to be going out together so often. So once you graduate, I’ll take you somewhere.”

“Oh no, that’s okay, I don’t really need you sensei, so if you could just tell me the place—“

Crack.

Although the store was so noisy, I could hear that sound distinctly.

“Oops, the chopsticks broke.”

“By all means, please take me along…”

I’m pretty sure chopsticks don’t break when you hold it, normally…

“Indeed. Look forward to it.”

Hiratsuka-sensei looked like she was the one enjoying herself.

It’s not too bad eating ramen with someone. Whether you’re alone or with someone, ramen was still delicious.

Without a shadow of doubt, the greatest food of them all was ramen. No objections are allowed.

One day... Mobile talk Hachiman& Hiratsuka

hiratsuka's mobile

FROM Hiratsuka Shizuka 22:43

TITLE nontitle

Thank you for today. I was a little surprised to find out Hikigaya-kun also liked ramen. I've done quite a bit of walking around and eating ramen before, so I'm rather knowledgeable on the subject. Oh, I don't actually mean eating ramen while walking (lol). In any case, I believe we promised to go out and eat together once you graduate, but I was thinking of choosing a place far away we could go to together since Hikigaya-kun would likely go by himself if it's somewhere nearby. So I'll tell you about the stores near school and your home ahead of time. First, if I had to name a particularly famous store near school, then it has to be "Tora no Ana". They have an impressive concentration of chain stores amongst the Iekei ramen shops in Chiba. Although the staple choice of noodles come from Sakai Seimen and Iekei Ramen, you shouldn't make light of them. Just like how their name doesn't contain the meaning of "house", they are taking the noodles of Iekei ramen in a new direction. The combination of rice (pickled vegetables) with the ramen is top-notch and putting nori on top of the soup and eating it is excellent. I also recommend tsukemen with whale meat. Another well-known Iekei ramen of Chiba is from "Masadaya". Although I'm familiar with the stores in Chiba, I've also gone to the stalls in Kaihin Makihuri. While it had a tonkatsu base with soy sauce, I can't help but be absorbed in the slight difference in taste from their soup. They've been especially competing over the quality of their hard-boiled eggs and pork fillets. They also had fried rice on their menu which makes them a little unique from other ramen shops. I'm sure a boy like Hikigaya-kun would be happy with a half fried rice set (lol). It's a little exciting adding red bean paste to your tsukemen, don't you think? As for another store, if we're going

hachiman's mobile

FROM Hachiman 22:51

TITLE Re

Um...

FROM Hiratsuka Shizuka 23:20

TITLE Re2

I apologize. I sent the mail while I was still typing. If we're going north, then we can't forget about "Naritake". I believe you're aware of this already, Hikigaya-kun, but they have a very fatty and rich soup with extremely thick noodles. It's the Holy Grail of Chiba ramen that is miraculouusly balanced. Its main store is in Tsudanuma, but there are branch stores in Chiba and Motoyawata and in recent years, they've estalished stores in Kinshichou and are expanding to Tokyo. I recommend trying extra fatty, but if you're feeling daring, then you can also go super fatty. As they say, "fat is written with moon and deliciousness". As for other stores in the other area, I also recommend "Kaizan". They have a tonkatsu base with a firm flavor of dashi, so the taste and fat balance is superb. The combination with medium long noodles is also perfect. And also, the unresistable feeling of satisfaction from the pork fillet that is drenched with the rich and heavy flavors of the soup. And above all else, the green onions! The original crunchiness of the green onions and the salty taste adds to a wonderful seasoning. Ramen also works with rice as well, but if we're going to those stores, then green onions are a must! In any case, we're at a stopping point, but do you have any questions or requests?

FROM Hachiman 23:25

TITLE Re3

I'm sorry. For you to be that serious about ramen is honestly kind of terrifying...

FROM Hiratsuka Shizuka 23:29

TITLE Re4

(´ ;ω; `)

Suddenly, Hikigaya Komachi thinks of the day her brother leaves.

Now that we were into the second half of August, the feeling of summer vacation was beginning to fade.

When I counted the remaining days of the month, I was assaulted by a feeling of melancholy which caused me to let out an eerie voice like the one from The Dish Mansion at Bancho. One daaaay, two daaaaaays… two moooonths wasn't enooooooough. If I could ask for more, I'd want three months.

Thinking, "The end of the Earth is in just x number of days!", I marked an "X" on the calendar that was posted on the refrigerator. If I added a circle[43] on there, it would've been the Takoyaki Manto Man.

There's about a little over two weeks left of summer vacation. *Hey wait, did you make a time leap?*[44]

Oh, you must be joking. Did I count the days wrong? I checked over the calendar again and something had crawled around at my feet.

"…What is it?"

When I looked down, our house cat Kamakura was looking at me with a displeased face.

Our staring showdown lasted for a few seconds. Then, Kamakura snorted his nose and rolled over on top of my feet. *Totally getting in my way.*

It looked like he wanted me to give him some attention.

Speaking of the past few days, Komachi had been really attached to Sabure… I suppose he was disgruntled from that and unfortunately, had to come to me instead.

I sluggishly sat on the floor and patted Kamakura's body.

At first, I followed the direction of his fur, slowly rubbing him from his head down to his tail. I did that for a bit until he groaned to which I gave him a light massage, moving my fingers around to his vital points.

Kamakura closed his eyes as he let out nasal breaths. He seemed considerably exhausted.

I imagined that he would be, what with Sabure chasing him around whenever they were in the same room.

Sabure demonstrated the agitation common to small breeds of dogs within our home and ran all over the place. On top of that, he'd charge at Kamakura with a strong curiosity asking him, "Let's play~!" as if this was his first time encountering a cat. Every time Sabure chased after him, Kamakura would find refuge at places Sabure couldn't reach like the top of the refrigerator or behind drawers.

And now that Komachi who would spoil him with whatever had been taken away from him, Kamakura had no choice but to come to me as a compromise. *Well, sorry you had to be stuck with me.*

"Well, you know. Just put up with it and let him have her for today… You're the older brother here, after all," I said to Kamakura, regurgitating the same thing I was told when I was younger. I didn't know Sabure's age,

[43] Takoyaki Manto Man's theme song

[44] Endless 8

but in the history of the Hikigaya household, Kamakura was here longer and systematically, he's the older brother.

After my explanation, Kamakura's tail struck the floor and he responded back reluctantly. *Sorry about that.*

I continued brushing him, squishing his paws and patting his stomach and the door of the living room opened.

"Onii-chan… Oh? It's rare to see you two together."

I raised my head to the voice and Komachi was holding Sabure in her arms. *Wait, what's so rare about his owner being with his cat…?*

"My affinity with cats is pretty high, you know."

"Onii-chan resembles a feline, after all."

I had no idea what she was getting at, but maybe she was talking about how overprotective I'd become over my turf. But I could turn that into something positive.

"Pretty much. I'm quite the king of beasts if I say so myself."

"Uh huh… Sure, why not."

"What's with the pause? Stop looking at me with gentle eyes like that. Don't you know? Lions don't work at all."

"Wow onii-chan, you totally are the king of beasts!"

"Right?" I said, smiling proudly. As if responding to that, Sabure who was in Komachi's arms barked back.

When he did, Kamakura who was laying at my feet snorted and got up. He made a "fueeh" yawn like a cat bus and quickly skittered off somewhere.

On his way out, his tail wagged like the waving of a hand. I watched him leave with a bitter smile.

"So, did you need something?" I asked, standing up.

Komachi then answered after her realization. "Ohh, right, right. Onii-chan, lemme borrow your smartphone."

"Sure… What're you going to use it for?"

"Yeah, so like, there's this app called Dog Lingo or something. If a dog barks into it, we'll get to know what he's feeling!"

"Oh, you don't say. They have things like that, huh?"

How convenient. I wonder if they're going to release a Human Lingo, too? People don't always say what they were feeling, after all.

Komachi rushed me going "Hurry, hurry!" and I went to grab my phone I threw on top of the table.

I tapped the screen with my fingers so I could download the app. On the overview page of the apps, there was the Dog Lingo app and also a Cat Lingo one.

“Oh, can you get the Cat Lingo one, too?”

“Yep.”

As I was told, I downloaded the aforementioned Dog Lingo app along with the Cat Lingo app.

“Here.”

Once the Dog Lingo app finished, I handed Komachi my phone. Komachi let down Sabure so she could quickly test the app.

“Here, here, Sabure. Try saying something.”

“Woof!” (Play with me!)

“Well, I expected as much.”

The message displayed on the Dog Lingo app didn’t go beyond what I had imagined and was actually in line with what dogs typically wanted.

We tried facing the Dog Lingo app towards Sabure for a while longer. Similarly to his owner in reading the mood, Sabure turned towards the cellphone and barked.

“Woof!” (Play with me!)

“Woof!” (Play with me!)

“Woof!” (Play with me!)

“Woof!” (Play with me!)

...Huh? Is this just getting copied and pasted?

“Onii-chan. Are you sure your phone isn’t broken?”

“No, it shouldn’t be since I don’t use it that much…”

I’ll try barking and use it on myself. If the words changed, then the Dog Lingo app was working as intended.

I promptly howled into the future.

“BOWBOW!” (I wish not to work!)

How frighteningly accurate. I don’t think the Excite Translator was as accurate as this.

“Doesn’t look broken, after all.”

“That’s true. Seems like the broken one is you, onii-chan…” Komachi had given up on me at this point and made an expression resembling an enlightened monk. Even I was a little hurt having a blood relative look at me so pitifully that I wanted to inform everyone in the family.

“…Anyway, he wants you to play with him.”

“Mm. Okay, I guess I’ll walk him then.”

“Yeah, you go do that.”

Now I wouldn’t have to deal with his whimpering for a while. Cute things were cute, but it’s a little problematic when he’s running around all day and night.

“Okay, go get the leash for me ♪!”

“Yeah, yeah.”

As I was told by Komachi, I grabbed the leash to walk Sabure from Yuigahama’s set of tools she gave us.

“Thanks. Can you put it around Sabure? I’ll keep him in place.”

Komachi restrained Sabure, leaving the job to me. In that opening, I quickly put on the leash around Sabure.

“There, is this good enough?” I asked, shaking the end of the leash.

Komachi nodded in satisfaction. “Yep, so let’s go!” She pointed towards the entrance.

“…You’re making me walk him?”

“If anything, I’m the one walking you, onii-chan. I mean, if I don’t do this, you’ll never leave the house.”

Well, you’re right about that… I wasn’t called Hikki for nothing.

I let out a deep sigh and tried to indicate with the my entire body that I didn’t want to go, but Komachi didn’t care and pushed me from behind.

“C’mon, c’mon. I’ll be going with you, okay?”

× × ×

The sun was already setting with the moon forming a crescent shape in the sky blanketed with an inkish indigo blue.

I lived in a quiet city—an area that spanned one generation and could be found in any other city—and running along the large road was a single river and along the river were fields of crop as well as numerous estates of people running an agricultural business.

According to the stories of my mom when she was younger, long time ago, there used to be swarms of fireflies at the rivers and fields. So that meant they’re no longer here anymore. An-chan, why do fireflies die so fast?[45]

As I recalled those memories, I looked at the paddy fields thinking that we probably wouldn’t see them even now.

Whoosh.

The rice stalks were pressed downwards by the passing wind.

[45] Grave of the Fireflies

The wind continued on, whizzing between the wonderfully ripened rice plants that absorbed water and nutrients throughout the day as they bathed in the sun.

When I was a child, I had always thought that was the work of an invisible yokai.

But now, I could no longer see fireflies or yokai.

Why did people become nostalgic? By saying things like, “It was good long time ago”, “The good old days”, “It’s nothing like back then”, and so on, they became prone to looking positively on the days that were long gone.

Perhaps they wanted to reflect back on those days, nostalgically and affectionately. Or they could merely be just lamenting over the things that changed and how they had changed.

In that case, didn’t that mean natural change was something we should be sad about?

Was going through growth, progress, and change a happy, correct, and wonderful thing?

Even if you didn’t change, your world and your surroundings would. People who didn’t want to be left behind desperately gave chase to keep up.

If you didn’t change, there wouldn’t be any grief. Even if nothing happens, I feel it’s a large merit that there wasn’t anything negative to come out of it. When you compared your finances and came out with no red marks, your management policies were by no means wrong.

That’s why I wouldn’t reject the fact that I hadn’t changed. I had no intentions of rejecting myself from the past nor myself in the present.

Because when all is said and done, changing was nothing more than running from the status quo. If your choice was to not run, that’s where you should stand firm without changing.

There were even things that could be gained by not changing. It’s similar in concept when you’re mashing the B button to cancel an evolution because you could learn new skills faster.

One day or even, some day? While it felt rather far into the future, I had gone through that question with an answer before.

Komachi squeezed the leash, enjoying the resistance from pulling Sabure. “Hey, hey, that’s dangerous with the cars around.”

A car drove right past our flank as if grazing us.

Sabure sniffed at the air and then smelled the grass and started chomping down on them. Dogs and cats had the tendency to eat grass and then spit out a hairball with them, so when taking them out on walks, this was an important process. As such, Komachi and I stood there and waited for him. Sabure was literally eating the grass.

After looking between Sabure and me, Komachi made a happy smile. “Wooow, it sure feels like a long time since I’ve gone out on a walk with onii-chan.”

“That’s true.”

She was certainly right. It’s been a considerably long time since I went out on aimless walks. I had always preferred spending time at home, so if I was going to go out, I needed a clear purpose like going shopping or going to a pet show. That’s why it’s been a while since I had gone out with Komachi.

Sabure tugged at the leash and Komachi smiled at him. “Good boy, good boy. Let’s get going.”

Answering with a single yelp, Sabure started trotting in a similar style as miniature dachshunds wouuld.

I walked after them.

The afterglow of the sun in the western sky. The lighting from all of the street lights placed in intervals. The varied illuminations from one house to the next. All the different lights blended together.

In the city that slowly darkened, there were streams of people in every direction.

Salarymen heading home, housewives going out to buy groceries for dinner, elementary students riding their bikes with their friends, middle school students chatting heartily at a convenience store on their way back from club, and high school students who were going out to have fun this very moment. And lastly, the mothers who went to pick up their children.

There was something nostalgic and warm about this commonplace scenery.

Quietly, Komachi whispered, “It’s a blessing to have someone welcome you at home, huh?”

“Well, I guess. I wouldn’t say that applies to every situation though.”

“Woow, this guy’s a total pain in the butt,” said Komachi, looking gloomy.

I mean, look, there’s always an exception to the rule for everything… No matter how much they’d say, “There’s no one to welcome me back…”[46], having some weird cover mascot greet me and recommend me to rinse my mouth wouldn’t make me happy at all…

“But that pain-in-the-butt onii-chan welcoming me home still makes me happy.” Komachi removed her gaze from me and faced Sabure.

I overtook Komachi who had lowered her pace. With my back facing her, she wouldn’t be able to see me loosen my mouth, after all.

“It’s not like I’m doing it for you or anything. You’re just a supplement. A supplement.”

After I answered her bluntly from embarassment, there was a small silence.

“Even so, it still makes me happy.”

I found myself turning back to her when she spoke with a warm voice.

Komachi placed her hand to her chest with closed eyes as if to check the gradually accumulating warmth. One by one, she uttered her words slowly, “That was your admirable and heroic little sister making a cute appeal to you just now.”

Her smile was the most fishy this summer.

“Okay, sure…”

Annoying…

[46] A commercial about Isodine

I brought up my dropped shoulders and walked off ahead, leaving Komachi and Sabure behind. *Jeez, she's never cute when she needs to be. Normally, she's cute, like super cute.*

Komachi kicked a pebble with the tip of her sandal and looked up at the stars that were faintly beginning to glitter. "When onii-chan was stuck in the hospital, Kaa-kun was there for me. He even welcomed me back at the door, too."

"He doesn't do that for me. He looks down on me from the veranda instead."

"Kaa-kun's a twisted sweetie, that's why," said Komachi, jokingly with a laugh. "Being surrounded by twisted sweeties sure is tough."

"That again…? I'm not acting sweet at all…"

I wasn't twisted at all, either. As a matter of fact, there probably wasn't a single person who lived life as straightforward as me. It's because the world was warped that someone like me who lived an honest life looked twisted.

"But hey, having a twisted sweetie like you welcome me back makes me happy."

This time I showed her a nihilistic smile. "Ha. I'm not always going to be there for you. You better become independent from your brother eventually."

"Huh…? Onii-chan, don't tell me you're going to leave the house?" Komachi stopped immediately and turned my way. Unlike her teasing smile earlier, she looked like she had the sails knocked out of her.

"Of course not. I'm not leaving the house when I don't have a reason to."

"…Thank goodness."

"Besides, it's so comfortable being at home, it's the best. I'm going to avoid working as much as possible. That is my justice."

"Or maybe not… Now I'm super worried about your future…" Komachi made a perplexed look.

I poked her head as if putting my hands on hers. "I can already commute to school from home and I plan to attend university in the same way. So unless there's a big reason, I won't be leaving any time soon."

The universities in the city of Chiba took roughly an hour to get to, so those ones were good enough. Of course, for the schools in Kanagawa or Tama, I might need to give it some more thought… If it's somewhere like Tokorozawa, I'd have to prepare my heavy equipment beforehand due to how rural the place is…

"It seems a bit weird for a boy your age to be thinking like that… Isn't it normal to want to leave the house?"

"Mmph, not really. Our family adopts the principle of laissez-faire and since both of our parents work, I can save my time. There's nothing inconvenient at all, either."

"Or so he says with all his reasons, but it turns out that leaving Komachi would make him super lonely…"

"What's with that weird narration…?"

Hahaha, what a dumb thing to say, hahaha.

"There's really no benefit in living alone. It costs money and I have to use my time to do chores. And I'm not doing any chores unless I get rewarded for them. You ever heard of equivalent exchange before?"

The Hikigaya family wasn't on bad terms at all. Pops was, well, quite the scumbag, but that really only applied to how he spoke and his thought process; everything else wasn't an issue. Since I never really thought about leaving the house, I didn't have any desire to be independent.

Of course, unless I had a reason to be. Well, I guess people who did live alone had some kind of reason or something…

"Oh c'mon, you'd totally feel lonely without me."

"Huh? Did you say something's lonely? Like, the thing that can help you check and find something in your neighborhood Akihabara?"

I had no such sentiment. Since I was someone who cherished my time alone, my wonderful something[47] was isolation itself.

"I'd be lonely though."

She completely ignored me. Tch, I guess "lonely" and "something" just didn't correlate all that clearly.

It felt like I was allowed to pass through like a pro soccer athlete and scored a goal, so I went along with Komachi's conversation. "…Well, I guess you would be, but I—"

"I'm not just talking about you, onii-chan. Like say, Yukino-san, she's living alone too, right? I wonder how Yukino-san feels about it… Is she okay?"

It sounded like she was implicitly saying that even Yukinoshita Yukino felt some kind of loneliness in her life. Always conducting herself flawlessly, occasionally she'd look fragile, or perhaps ephemeral, but they were certainly things I felt from her. But exactly what that really meant, I still had yet to understand.

"Also," said Komachi, continuing. "—I think even the side that gets left behind feels lonely, too."

…Yeah, that's for sure.

Just why did I think the ones leaving were the only ones who felt lonely? It's obvious that the ones being left behind were going to feel the same way. I'm pretty confident I'd break down into tears if Komachi ever got married and left the house.

Komachi pulled at Sabure's leash as if instructing him. I took the leash from her as if accepting a baton from her hand.

"Onii-chan?"

"You're tired, right? I'll hold it for you."

Of course, there's no way she'd get tired from walking a small-sized dog like Sabure. Only girls with no physical strength would get exhausted.

Komachi looked at me strangely, but then broadly smiled. "Okay, you can handle him then. In which case, I'll make sure onii-chan doesn't run off anywhere," said Komachi. She then gripped my hand.

"I'm not going anywhere. I'll be at the house until I become a bride."

"…Is that something you should be saying as a full-time house husband?"

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[47] A commercial by an electronics company called Sato Musen that uses the slogan – "Let's check it, let's find it, that wonderful something"

“Then, until I become a husband.”

“Okay, sure. I kinda feel like it doesn’t really matter anymore…”

A walk on the streets after a considerably long time.

After a detour of the town that had changed from how it used to be, let’s head home.

× × ×

When we were just about done with preparing for dinner, a buzz came from the intercom. In place of Komachi who was occupied with the saucepans, I went to check on the intercom.

On the intercom’s monitor, Yuigahama was restlessly adjusting her hair. It looks like she came to pick up Sabure. After checking, I went to the front entrance.

When I opened the door, she waved her hands at me.

“Ah, yahallo.”

“Hey.”

“Here you go, it’s a souvenir.” She noisly handed me a paper bag.

Judging by the size and the weight of the bag, it probably wasn’t a wooden sword. Darn… If it was some kind of key holder with the shape of a sword entwined by some bizarre dragon or a skeleton key holder that glowed in the dark, I would’ve been kind of happy.

“They’re local specialties!”

“Ohh…”

I glanced inside the paper bag and there were local sweets as Yuigahama had told me. Well, it’s pretty common for these local specialty candies to be for sale.

She went with a safe choice, taking into consideration that while it told people where she went, it’s more likely for people to like it than hate it. The sweets were also wrapped into small portions, so sharing it with others at work or at school was easy. It’s a souvenir that kept others in mind.

But upon looking at it, I was hit with a past memory.

“This, huh…?”

“Huh? You don’t like it?” Yuigahama peeked inside the paper bag in my hands with a look of concern.

“No, I didn’t mean that… Don’t girls always buy these kinds of souvenirs? Heck, all the girls in class do.”

“Oh, I guess that’s true. There are some girls who don’t, though. Like Yumiko.”

Miura, huh? That’s the Queen for you. I had to respect the fact that she saw it as her natural-born right to be given things.

“Once upon a time, people used to throw wrappers of local specialty sweets like these in my shoe box… I mean, the perp was clearly one of the girls from my class and the fact that they wouldn’t even try to hide their criminal conduct made it hurt even more…”

A dry laugh welled up from inside me.

When Yuighama saw that, she frantically tried to make me feel better. “I-It’s okay now, don’t worry! That won’t happen to you anymore!”

“I sure hope so.”

“It’ll be fine! No one even knows you enough to do that, Hikki!”

“True.”

Yuigahama clenched her fist in an attempt to persuade me.

But she was really terrible at cheering me up that it ended up working, so I decided to let it slide. I'm glad I decided to develop my stealth ability. At this level, I could probably sneak by the Chimera Ant King[48].

As I felt relieved knowing I'd be able to spend the second semester of school in peace, Yuigahama looked into our house, curious about our situation. "So, how's Sabure?"

"Yeah, he's doing fine. Komachi." I called inside the house and Komachi came to the entrance holding Sabure.

Sabure yelped in her arms. Seeing that, Yuigahama smiled. "Thanks a bunch, Komachi-chan!"

"Oh no, not at all," said Komachi.

Yuigahama petted Sabure and asked, "Was he a handful?"

"Nope, not in the least. We played around with the Dog Lingo app and stuff, so we had a blast."

"Dog Lingo? Ahh, that thing. They had that a long time ago, didn't they?"

"They made an app for it."

Since it'd be faster to show it to her, I started up the app and Yuigahama looked at my cellphone to see what it's about. To test it, Yuigahama called to Sabure. "Here, Sabure. Onee-chan's here for you!"

Sabure tilted his head with a puzzled look.

"Arf?" (Who's this person?)

"Sabure!?" Yuigahama let out a voice of despair. As if scared by that, Sabure welped and ran around my feet. I grabbed ahold of him and then held him up.

I carefully placed him inside the carry bag that Komachi brought to the entrance. After zipping the bag up, I handed it over to Yuigahama. "Here. I'm sure he'll remember you in a couple of days or so."

"Uuurgh… I really wish he didn't forget me in the first place…" Yuigahama said with a voice on the verge of tears and accepted the bag.

Sabure placed the tip of his nose against the mesh of the bag and whimpered.

"…Alright, see you later."

Although I didn't play with him very much, now that we were separating, I felt a little emotional, even more so when he was looking so reluctant.

"Yui-san, feel free to bring Sabure over again."

Komachi had moist eyes, being the one who had taken care of Sabure in the past three days, as she held Yuigahama's hands.

"I will, I will! I'll definitely stop by again~!"

"Yes, please do. So please come by with a box of cakes when our parents are around so you can meet them."

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[48] Hunter x Hunter

“Oh, right, I should greet your paren—eh, ehhh!? I’m not coming for that! Just kidding, I’m not coming!”

Komachi eyes glittered suspiciously for a moment, but after clicking her tongue, her expression went back to normal.

“Anyway, please come over again. I’ll be waiting for you.”

“Okay, thanks,” said Yuigahama, expressing her gratitude. She then picked up her other luggage with Sabure.

It was probably about time for her to head home. There, I remembered something.

“Oh yeah, about Yukinoshita. She might be at the fireworks festival. Hiratsuka-sensei said it’s a locally sponsored event, so a lot of big wigs are attending with their families or something.”

“Oh I see… Okay. I’ll try go—“ Yuigahama paused for short moment as if something had come to mind. She then let out a small breath and quietly turned her gaze towards me. “U-Um… Hey, do you wanna go to the fireworks festival together? Like, it’ll be my thanks for taking care of Sabure, my treat.”

“So she says, Komachi. Let’s go.”

“Go with just the two of us” was a choice I immediately eliminated from the start. And since it’s her way of thanking us, I think it’s only proper that Komachi tagged along since she did most of the work.

Komachi placed her hands on her waist seeing through my intentions and sighed in resignation. It sounded like she mumbled, “Good grief, what’s wrong with my trashynii-chan?”, but I ignored it.

She then turned her face towards Yuigahama with an apologetic look. “Ahh, I’m really happy for your invitation, but see, I’m actually stilll in the middle of my exams. I’d love to take you up on your offer, but I can’t exactly go out anywhere right now…”

“Oh okay… Not much you can do there.”

“Yes. I’m sorry. Oh! But see! But see, there are a lot of things I’d like to buy, but… Argh, I just don’t have the time! There are things I want, but there’s no time to go out and buy them at all! What ever am i going to do, huh? There’s a *lot* of stuff too, so it might be too much for Yui-san by herself, you know?”

After she said all of that in monotone, she totally glanced at me…

Realizing the meaning behind her gesture, Yuigahama leaned forward. “Oh! No kidding! Hikki! Why don’t we buy some of Komachi’s stuff then!? I mean, I do owe you two a lot for the help!”

“Ah, ahh… no, uh…” I tried to finish my words, but Yuigahama gave me a direct stare.

“It’s a little concerning if a girl goes to a fireworks festival by herself… After all, the world is a dangerous place to be in nowadays… Oh gosh, if *only* there was a boy around who has nothing better to do…”

I could hear Komachi’s whisper from behind me.

“U-Um… I mean, if Hikki’s busy or has plans to go with someone else, then… i-it’s fine…” Yuigahama looked at me while fidgeting.

I didn’t have a set schedule. Which meant that on the day of the fireworks festival, I was available.

Not to mention, the way she was asking me like that made it hard to refuse her, if ever. With the inner and outer moats completely overrun, it’s like the summer campaign of the Siege of Osaka.

"…Well, it's for Komachi, so just give me a call whenever," I said, and went back to the living room.

"Okay, I'll send you a mail later!"

Before I closed the door, that energetic voice reached me from behind.

× × ×

Now that Sabure was gone, the house was peaceful.

It was so quiet that the around-the-clock barking seemed like a lie. The clattering of the dishes being washed filled the room quite audibly. When I turned off the water faucet near my hand, I could hear the insects from far away.

Until our parents came back home, the tranquil and typical time of the Hikigaya household would go on.

Komachi, who I could see from the kitchen, looked lifeless as she sank into the sofa. I took out a cup of barley tea and poured a cup as I listened to her long sigh and handed it to her.

"Good work."

She took the glass I handed to her and she gulped it down. After letting out a satisfied gasp, she handed back the glass with a groan.

"You better believe I'm tired… It feels like I sent my child away."

"Really…"

Komachi looked like she had grown old, resembling an old lady sitting absentmindedly at a porch and was making a peaceful expression.

"But if it's Yui-san, I can be at peace and leave everything to her…"

"He was never yours in the first place… Just how cheeky are you…?"

I found myself sighing to which Komachi looked up at me and tilted her head. "Huh…? Ohh, you mean Sabure."

"Huh? We weren't talking about Sabure? What were you talking about then?"

"Nooooothing at all," said Komachi, looking discouraged and she lay down on the sofa. She stretched out her hand to the cushion to bring it closer, but Kamakura was sleeping there.

Kamakura didn't look as alert as he usually was because he was stretching out his body in a pose like "holy cow", curled and sleeping. With Sabure gone, it looks like he could finally relax.

He exposed his entire hairy stomach and was completely defenseless. His no-guard behavior would shame even the Southern Black Panther, Ray Sefo.

Seeing that, Komachi eyes glittered. "Kaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa-kun!"

She flew at him and buried her face in his stomach, squishing his paws, and when they were together, he started purring.

“Oh! Maybe we’ll be able to hear what Kaa-kun is saying now! Onii-chan, the Cat Lingo! Quick with the Cat Lingo! Hurry, hurry!”

“R-Right…”

As she instructed, I hurriedly took out my cellphone. After I booted up the Cat Lingo app, I handed it over to Komachi. She then placed the phone to Kamakura’s neck.

“Grgrgrgr.” (It hurts, help… Itchy. Tasty.)[49]

“Kaa-kun!?”

Hey, is this cat okay? Actually, is the person who made this Cat Lingo app okay? He’s clearly infected, isn’t he?

After that, as if to distract herself from the loneliness, Komachi mercilessly and thoughtlessly poked at Kamakura. Although it was only for a brief amount of time, she was rather fond of Sabure.

As I watched Komachi and Kamakura pleasantly poke at each other, she looked at the screen of my cellphone and rose her voice. “Ah, onii-chan. Your phone’s gonna die.”

“Mm, okay.”

I took the phone when she held it out.

The battery display showed it at a few percent left over. It could die at any moment. The clock at the top of the screen also entered my vision. It was about a good time as any.

“Good timing. Hurry up and go back to studying.”

“Okaaay.”

After rubbing Kamakura one last time, Komachi got up from the sofa and left the living room. She was probably going to do her studying in her room.

Now that he was finally released from Komachi, Kamakura looked as tired as he was when Sabure was around and walked towards me. *Good work, little guy.*

As I dug around for my charger to charge my phone, Kamakura purred.

The Cat Lingo app that was still running on my phone reacted and displayed a response.

When I read it, I broke into a smile. “Yeah, you got that right.”

Kamakura responded to me once again, but by the time he did, the screen of my cellphone had already turned off.

[49] Resident Evil

Birthday
(Aug.8)
Mobile talk Hachiman& Komachi

komachi's mobile

FROM Komachi 00:00
TITLE nontitle
Happy birthday!

hachiman's mobile

FROM Hachiman 03:19
TITLE Re
Thanks.

FROM Hachiman 03:21
TITLE Re3
You were awake? Go to sleep.

FROM Hachiman 03:22
TITLE Re5
Night.

FROM Komachi 03:20
TITLE Re2
A time-lag reply is unfair!

FROM Komachi 03:21
TITLE Re4
((_ _))..zzzZZ

And so, Yuigahama Yui disappears into the crowd.

Out in the world, you'd often hear remarks like, "We're no longer connected with the local community anymore" or "Our relationship with the neighbors has gotten weaker".

Well yes, they seemed accurate. If we take into consideration that I—my relationship with my neighbors *and* school being practically nonexistent—was the one saying them, there's no doubt about them.

Long ago—though I wouldn't say I knew it as long ago—I had never really felt close to something like the local community. That might be because whenever someone mentioned it, I had no idea who or what they were referring to. If they said it was the president of the neighborhood association or the mayor, I couldn't think of a single face. In middle school, they'd make you participate in afternoon, clean-up efforts chanting some slogan, "Let's pick up the trash for the local community." But it ultimately turned into nothing more than my own personal time to go on a stroll because really, I couldn't muster any kind of motivation for people I didn't even know.

However, there would come a time when we'd finally feel the existence of this "local community".

And such a day was like today.

Throughout the day, I could hear a lot of popping sounds in the distance. And the city was afflicted with small oscillations back and forth as if waking up from a deep slumber.

After I left the house, I could directly feel the commotion and restlessness in the air as if they were acting in conjunction with the fierce rays of the summer sun.

In making my way to the station, there were numerous people heading in the same direction. Women dressed in yukatas stuck out like a sore thumb in the crowd.

On the train, I was encircled by groups with men and women on friendly terms and families carrying coolers. I inserted my earphones into my ears and stood there absentmindedly, only to be pushed further and further into the corner by the pressure. It's only a matter of time until my spiritual pressure[50] had vanished.

For a few minutes, I breathed in and out quietly enough so that no one could notice me. The train passed several stations and the next station was finally my stop.

I was the only one to leave through the opened doors. The people who entered through the door, however, were far greater in number. After watching the doors close with the "door's-closin'-quick"[51], I laboriously walked to the ticket gate.

Jeez… it feels completely like I walked all this way for nothing. I can't help but be depressed when the thought of having to go in another crowded train like that one…

As I thought about how I'd unload all of my dissatisfaction on her with complains when we met, I walked against the current of people past the ticket gate.

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[50] Bleach

[51] The original phrase is ドア閉まります (doa shimarimasu) which means "The door is closing". This phrase gets slurred to ダァシェイリェス (daa sheiresu) which is what Hachiman says here

Our appointment was one minute past its scheduled time.

I think she should be here by now… I made a look around, but I didn't see any signs of her anywhere. I didn't see a Bulbasaur or Squirtle, either.

I leaned against a pillar of the concourse and familiar people from my school passed by. Of course, I didn't call out to them nor did they call out to me since we weren't acquaintances.

Both the boys and girls were wearing yukatas and jinbeis. As I followed those high school students with my eyes, I spotted a girl walking towards me from the north entrance with her sandals noisily clapping the floor.

Small blooming flowers were irregularly decorated on her peach yukata and her vermillion sash looked attractively vivid. Her hair was tied up instead of the usual chinese bun style.

She didn't look used to wearing her sandals, so when she came trotting over here looking dangerous close to falling over, I found myself taking a few steps closer to her out of reflex.

"Oh, Hikki. There was some stuff going on… so I ended up kinda late…" She smiled, looking embarrassed and apologetic.

"Nah, don't worry about it."

Somehow it was quiet even though we were both facing each other. Yuigahama was looking down and fiddling with her hair. *Are you Hamtaro or something?*

"Well, uh… that yukata looks pretty good."

Why the hell am I complimenting the yukata? You're supposed to praise the person. But it looked like I didn't need to correct myself since Yuigahama realized what I wanted to say and with her eyes darting all over the place, she answered, "Th-Th-Th-Thanks."

And it's quiet again. What the heck? The only things I could think of with all this silence were all the Seagal[52] movies…

I opened my mouth to do something about the stiff mood. "…I guess we should get going."

"…Okay."

Once I started walking, the sound of footsteps followed right behind me.

We passed through the ticket gates and waited for the descending train. Yuigahama was facing downwards the entire time and didn't say anything.

I was the type of person that wasn't bothered by the silence.

But it did bother me that Yuigahama was so quiet. Considering how she'd be a little annoying about the dumbest things, I was kind of worried that she was angry at me or something. For the time

being, I brought up something random to ignite a conversation. "Hey, why did we meet up midway to the festival instead of at the actual place?"

"Well… It might be hard for us to meet up there since there's so many people."

"We have cellphones, you know."

"It's really hard to get through, okay?"

Ahh, now that she mentioned it, I recall hearing about how making calls in crowded areas was difficult. I never actually used my phone in those situations, so I was under the impression it was just an urban legend, though, it's not like I used my phone in empty areas, either.

"Besides… it'd be kinda boring meeting at the festival, too…"

"Who cares if it's boring? We're not getting edible seaweed or something…"

"G-Gosh, why's it matter!? Do you want to complain about anything else?"

"Nope…"

I got her mad…

Now we were silent again. But when I realized how close we were, I started walking as if groping around in the darkness despite it still being broad daylight.

"Do you—"

"Have you—"

We both simultaneously spoke.

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[52] For some reason, a lot of Seagul's movies in Japanese have the word 沈黙 (chinmoku) which means "silence" in their titles.

Yuigahama frantically motioned me to go first.

"…Do you usually go to the fireworks festival?"

"Ah, I do. I usually go every year with my friends."

"Ohh…"

The moment I answered, the train had arrived.

The train was packed with people seemingly heading to the fireworks festival and amongst them were, of course, people wearing yutakas, people carrying vinyl sheets, and parasols.

But it's just one station away. We both stood near the door. Once the door closed with a racket, the trained started off.

"So, what were you trying to say earlier?"

"Oh, right… Have you been to the fireworks festival before? That's what I wanted to ask."

She told me, "We thought the same thing, huh?" which was so pointless that I wanted to die. *Um, can you stop with that embarrassing smile? Because it's going to infect me, too. Like a real pandemic.*

I removed my gaze and checked the time. *Still four in the afternoon, huh…?*

"I went with my family once when I was in elementary."

"Oh, okay.."

The conversation then died again.

Our conversation that got chopped into pieces like a tuna continued as the train continued running.

As soon as the port tower came into view in the distance, the train stepped on its breaks.

"Hyah!"

There was a brief shriek, the sound of the clapping wooden sandals, and a faint, sweet aroma. I could feel something soft weighing down on my shoulders.

I imagine it's because she wasn't used to those sandals. She lost her balance and fell towards me. Naturally, I caught her.

"……"

"……"

Our faces were incredibly close. Yuigahama's cheeks turned red and she hurriedly took some distance. "S-Sorry…"

"Mm, well, it's pretty packed in here, after all…"

I turned my face away, pretending to look at the outside scenery. From a position that Yuigahama couldn't see, I let out a long sigh. Only now did I start to sweat.

Th-That made me nervous… Phew, close one. If I was any other guy, I probably would've started liking her.

But that wouldn't ever happen. After all, I wouldn't ever misunderstand, mistake, or assume something anymore. "Unpopular boys" had the bad habit of trying to make plain coincidences and phenomena seem more meaningful than they really are.

It's common sense to be greeted in the morning, the only reason they dropped their handkerchief in front of you was because of a careless mistake, and they really only wanted your mail address at your part-time job, so they could contact you for shift changes.

I didn't believe in coincidences, fate, or destiny. I believed only in company orders. I don't think becoming an adult like that was very good. *Yeah, I really don't want to work…*

The station we got off on was overflowing with people and noise.

The looming Chiba Port Tower illuminated the lower world with its mirror-like walls, intensifying the brilliance of the setting sun several times over that served to liven up the expectations of those who waited for the start of the festival.

Everyone laughed and exchanged looks of animated joy.

On the streets, there were food stalls with the standard takoyaki and okonomiyaki, neighborhood convenient stores and liquor shops placing their products out on display, and restaurants fervently advertising to potential customers that they could view the fireworks from their place.

This was a summer in Japan.

Perhaps it was carved in my genes as well because even I was starting to feel excited.

The curtains to the fireworks festival for the denizens of Chiba were about to be raised at this very moment.

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It was a short distance away to the fireworks festival venue from the front of the station. The public park was practically adjacent to the station. But with this many people, we couldn't move ahead as we had hoped.

The plaza of the park was normally sparse with people and only gave me the impression that it was wide, but I could tell from afar that it was blotted with people.

The wind that blew from the sea through the gaps between all these people felt pleasant.

I looked at time and it was still only six in the evening. The fireworks were supposed to start at seven thirty.

Until then, what should we do…? I turned to Yuigahama at my side to check with her. "It looks like we still have some time left. What we should do? Go home?"

"We're not going home! How can you suggest that so naturally!?"

Oops, my bad habit kicked in where I'd immediately think of going straight home whenever I went out. No matter the time, no matter the situation, my biggest priority was to make it back home in one piece. The fact I was so suited to being a spy or ninja was a little problematic, I had to say.

“So what then?”

Just when I was going to add with “Go home, after all?”, Yuigahama took out her cellphone from her purse.

“Um, so Komachi sent me a mail listing out the things she wants as thanks.” Yuigahama operated her phone and then showed me. The bothersome decorated and sparkling rhinestones on her phone were incredibly annoying, but I decided to focus on the screen.

Komachi’s Shopping List:

Yakisoba – 400 yen

Cotton candy – 500 yen

Ramune – 300 yen

Takoyaki – 500 yen

The memory of watching fireworks – Priceless[53]

What’s with that last one…?

When I visualized how she might’ve typed this with a triumphant look, onii-chan felt a little embarrassed…

Yuigahama took my expression as if I was annoyed and let out an awkward “ahaha”. *So embarassing! Onii-chan is SO embarrassed right now!*

But still, there she goes again with her meddlesome tactics… I thought for a bit, but well, I could see that Komachi was trying to be considerate in her own way. I wasn’t *that* dense that I’d be missing the obvious planning she had in mind.

Rather, I was sensitive. So sensitive and perceptive that I was prone to overreacting.

After all, eighty percent of the boys in the world were always living their lives with the thought, “Could it be this girl likes me?”

And that’s exactly it’s necessary to reprimand yourself. You needed to be calm and collected, so you could look at yourself with an indifferent attitude and say, “Fat chance.”

I didn’t believe in others all that much, but I absolutely didn’t believe in myself at all.

I let out a sigh and adjusted my mood. “Alright, I guess we should just buy them as we go…”

“Okay.”

Yuigahama trotted along in her sandals cheerfully, either due to Komachi’s mail relieving the tension in the mood or due to the passion of the festival affecting her.

I could hear her humming along with her every footstep very clearly in this crowd.

[53] Parody of the MasterCard commercial

Streams of people continued towards the plaza.

Numerous stalls were situated side by side, many of them booming with business.

I thought I knew how tasty the food was, but now that I was in front of the food stalls, the way the food was highlighted by the naked light bulbs whtted my appetite. Case in point, the sauce and the oil on the yakisoba made it look wonderfully juicy. I thought I was looking at Kabaya[54] for a second there.

Yuigahama pulled at my sleeve, her eyes sparkling. “Hey, hey, what should we eat fiirst? Apple candy? Apple candy first, right?”

“That’s not even on the list…”

It looked like her objective wasn’t to buy things anymore; now, it’s to eat…

Yuigahama stared at the apple candy and reluctantly groaned, but then faced her cellphone to me with her hand. “Well, what should we get first then?”

“First, we should get the stuff that’s okay at normal temperature. So that means we—“

“Oh wow! You can win a PS3 here!”

Just as I tried to move, she pulled my sleeve. Yuigahama had her attention stolen by the treasure angling stall. Beside the PS3, there were other gorgeous goods piled with it.

“No, I doubt it… Anyway, listen to what I’m saying.”

“Huh? But there are strings connected to it.”

“Yeah, they probably are connected. But we don’t know which ones are connected to which.”

The strings for the treasure angling stall were connected to every prize in which all the strings were joined at a single point and then extended out again in various directions. Exactly what kind of mechanism they had prepared in the middle of all that, we didn’t know.

“Just remember, the way they set up all these good looking items for display is the first trap. There’s always a flipside when something’s convenient for you. Common sense much?”

“Uh, common sense from where exactly…? People from the underworld?”

While we were having that conversation, the old man of the treasure angling stall glared at me.

I made a discrete getaway from the stall and hurried to a different one.

I guess we should start with the cotton candy.

At the cotton candy stall, a machine was puffing while releasing a sweet smell in the air, spinning white, fluffy strings and pressing them together.

They were then packed into a bag and sealed at the end. These kind of resembled the Toei bags that had anime characters and heroes printed on them with money inside.

[54] Kabaya is a Japanese confectionary company

Nothing had changed regardless of the generation; I think this was how it felt when I was a child. Similar in age to me, Yuigahama looked apparently nostalgic and looked at the cotton candy with sweet eyes. “Oh wow, isn’t this like totally nostalgic!? Hey, which one should we get?”

“They’re all the same inside. I’ll go with this. I’ll take this please.”

I pointed at the pink bag in front of me and handed over five hundred yen.

Yeah, well, I had absolutely no interest in anime catered towards little girls nor did I watch them. But Komachi’s a girl and all, so you know, it’d be better to give her something from that P-P-Precure thing or whatever, right? Yep, I had zero interest it. I was apathetic to it that I couldn’t tell the difference between Jewel Pets and Pretty Rhythm.

After we bought the cotton candy, we purchased the ramune and takoyaki.

“So, next is yakisoba?”

“Right. I think I saw it around over there earlier…”

The moment I turned around, I noticed there were people looking at us. They waved their hands and approached us.

“Oh hey, it’s Yui-chan.”

“Oh, Sagamin.” Yuigahama answered back along with a small wave and walked a few steps towards them. Both parties took similar actions.

Oh ho, so this was what they called “mirroring”. By copying the actions of the other party, it made it easier to connect to each other; this was a technique I saw in Mission Research[55].

So… who?

At times like these, it’d be better to blend into the background so diminish my presence. *I’ll become a tree!*[56]

But you know? When girls called out to each other, there’s this bizarre difference in their attitudes towards each other. Yuigahama was more or less friendly. On the other hand, it felt like Sagamin or whatever her name wasn’t as intimate and looked a little distant.

So, who the heck is this?

They apparently had the same thoughts as me when they looked at Yuigahama for an explanation.

“Um…”

“Ah, right. He’s Hikigaya-kun in the same class. And this is Sagami Minami-chan in our class.”

Ohh, so she’s in our class. Now that she mentioned it, I vaguely recall her. I thought, giving her a small bow.

In that instant, our eyes met.

“Pfft”.

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[55] Mission Research 200-X is a Japanese variety program where they go around researching strange, interesting, and out-of-place phenomena and stuff.

[56] Parody of Chitanda Eru’s catch phrase from Hyouka – 気になります　(ki ni narimasu) which means “I’m curious!”

For a moment, Sagami's expression had a smirk.

"Oh, so that's how it is! So you both came together, huh? Jeez, just look at us, it's just a fireworks festival of girls for us[57]! That's so nice, I wanna live my youth, too!"

"…Ahaha! What are you even saying, we're not at a swim meet or anything! We're really not doing anything like that~" Yuigahama hesitated for a moment, but quickly went along and laughed.

But I wasn't in the slightest mood to laugh.

Just seconds earlier, that smile Sagami had. It was something I was all too familiar with.

It wasn't a smile nor was it a laugh.

It was a commanding laugh of scorn.

This girl, after seeing "the boy that Yuigahama Yui brought", was undoubtedly sneering at her.

"Ehh, oh c'mon, what's the big deal? It's summer and all, so that's totally cool."

Her smile retained its shape, her gaze taking that moment to evaluate me. That was enough to make me understand that her earlier warmth was a lie, a coldness that made my heart congeal over.

The more my heart froze over, the more clear my head became.

My thoughts gradually became more vivid as if liquid nitrogen was poured down my spine. My reasoning, my logic, and my experience all assimilated and bumped heads with my emotions. My emotions were quick to surrender, not bothering to wait for a proper outcome.

Once again, I was on the verge of misunderstanding.

Sagami Minami and I wouldn't get along. We didn't know a thing about each other.

So what's the fastest way to understand people you didn't know very well?

That's to label them.

The material she needed to understand a person like me was "my affiliated caste". Obviously, that wasn't limited to just Sagami; it applied to anyone else.

Before even trying to know someone personally, they'd start first with their affiliated group, their locations, their positions, and their titles. In school and society, it's commonplace to have your human qualities be judged based on those things alone. I stopped hearing about this recently, but when you were out job hunting, you were wrung through a filter regarding rumors about the plausibility of your academic record.

It had completely slipped my mind that Yuigahama was someone that could handle inter-group communication, but she was originally someone who had belonged to the top caste in class, in school even.

Then you had me; I belonged to the bottom of the barrel. Putting aside Yukinoshita who was outside of those castes, a simple look from the sidelines would tell you that unless there's some kind of charity, Yuigahama would never interact with someone like me.

[57] Parody of a program in Japan called, "A swim meet full of girls!"

Crap… At a prominent fireworks festival like this, students from nearby high schools would definitely gather here. I wasn't being attentive enough.

The current situation was something like a social exchange between ladies. The man they brought along would likely serve as their status symbol. At the same time, the bag they carried and the brand of clothes they wore would be used to measure their value.

Suppose if I were Hayama instead, it's likely their reactions would've been completely different. It's possible they might even call Yuigahama onto a heroine interview[58] tonight. But with me, I'd be treated as defaulting at a court-martial trial.

I won't think that the worlds we lived in were different. Imagine how comfortable it'd be if we did. This world's a pain because we're living in it so half-heartedly.

I could be all smiles, but with me still here, only Yuigahama would look pitiful smiling.

"Looks like there's people lining up for yakisoba, so I'll be going over there."

"Ah, okay. I'll be right there." Yuigahama answered with a seemingly apologetic smile. I left the area and quickly went on my way.
The faster I could eliminate any possible factors that could lead to Yuigahama being laughed at, the better. While I could still hear Yuigahama and Sagami talking behind me, I paid them no attention and continued to move my legs.

Using my second-hand memory and the source of the smell, I arrived at the front of the yakisoba stand.

When the naked light bulbs illuminated the yakisoba in a plastic pack fastened by a rubber band, it somehow got my appetite going.

After paying for the yakisoba, Yuigahama came over.

"Sorry…" said Yuigahama, looking a little awkward. She had no reason to apologize to me, however. Because of that, I wasn't sure how to respond.

"…Candy apple."

"Huh?" Yuigahama eyes blinked with an absent murmur.

I pressed further in emphasis. "You wanted to buy some, right?"

"Y-Yeah! I totally do! I'll give you half, Hikki!"

"I don't want any."

Yes, well, I'll gladly take the other half of the apple if it gets cut cleanly in half with a knife or something, otherwise, sharing it any other would be a bit, you know…

Anyway, that should've been everything on the list.

It's just about time for the fireworks to go off. I didn't need to bother checking the time because I could tell from the growing commotion from everyone around us.

[58] Heroine interviews are interviews held after a victory in a team sports match

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When the sun finally dipped past the Bay of Tokyo, the zenith of the sky was bathed in an indigo blue darkness. The moon climbed as high as it could if excitedly waiting for the fireworks to be shot up.

The plaza, from the street lined with rows of stalls, served as the main venue and was teeming with people.

When I thought about how vinyl sheets were placed all over leaving no extra room, there were people who had been here form the start and were exchanging sake cups, and the children crying in the distance, there were loud voices going back and forth nearby.

As such, there was no available space for us to occupy.

If I was alone, I could've managed to find some place to take a seat to watch the fireworks from afar, but since I was with someone, it's a different story.

We decided to search around for open space where the both of us could sit since standing the entire time wasn't an option.

With that being said, we didn't have vinyl sheets, let alone newspaper. I couldn't let Yuigahama sit down on the floor since she was wearing a yukata. I considered sitting at nearby benches, but they were all occupied as if the same thought crossed everyone's mind.

There's nowhere to go. Isn't this exactly like a school event for me?

"Yikes, sure is crowded, huh?" said Yuigahama, making a problematic laugh. *You got that right.*

"Had I known how ridiculous this would be beforehand, I would've prepared a vinyl sheet."

"J-Jeez. You make it sound like it I'm at fault here… Sorry, I should've told you, huh?"

"…That's not it. I'm not used to this, so I didn't think that far ahead. My bad."

If only I gave it some more thought, I should've been able to anticipate this. I was a bit depressed at my own incompetence.

I'm sure the so-called popular men were the guys who could be perfectly considerate of others and be thoroughly prepared in a situation like this. Management of these little details was far more important than how good their face looked and so forth.

For example, sending sincere mails, looking things up prior to going out, or being able to hold a tasteful conversation while waiting in line.

...Ehh, what's with that? Sounds like a total pain.

If you had to do all that just so you could be popular, I'd rather just stay unpopular. Seriously. Also, why was it the guy who always had to do the courting? Where did gender equality go?

…Wait! Was it because they did the courting that they were popular!? Wow, talk about worthless. But I loved myself for being able to say stuff like this.

Well, you know. Wouldn't it just be a lie if I forced myself to be someone I'm normally not when I'm by myself?

Could you really call the affection you earned from all your efforts actual affection towards your self as well as towards who you really are?

Whether it was okay to say you were still "you" after changing so you could be liked and loved or not, I wasn't sure. If that's something you created by lying and pretending, it was likely to crash and burn eventually. If something essential changed in you, you certainly couldn't really call that your true self.

These worthless thoughts ran by in my head and I let out an exhausted sigh. I came back to my senses not knowing when I had dropped my gaze, and looked up.

My eyes met with Yuigahama who had a dumb look with her mouth open.

"What…?"

"…You know Hikki, you can be pretty considerate, huh?"

"Huh? You some kinda idiot? I'm super considerate. I'm so considerate to the point I don't bother anyone by standing quietly in the corner."

I'd speak to no one, I'd walk behind everyone instead of next to them, and I'd avoid inviting people, so I didn't get in the way of their plans. I was such a master of consideration that I could easily shoot a Spirit Ball[59] right now.

"Ahaha, that's not what I mean… I mean, like, you're nice or something?"

"Oh yeah? Good on you to notice. You're right, I am nice. I've been through all kinds of things in my life, but I haven't gone out for revenge on a single person at all. If I was any other normal person, this world would've ended already. You could even call me the savior of the world."

"Normal people can't destroy the world! They don't go through all sorts of things either!"

Wow, she's being totally reasonable.

"Yeah, whatever. Anyway, it looks open over there, so let's go there."

"Okay."

Although we started to proceed ahead, there was a last-minute rush of people heading to the stalls and bathrooms before the start of the fireworks, so we ended up having to go against traffic.

In the jumbled crowd of people, I walked as if weaving through the openings.

This had become a habit of mine; that is, I walked by killing any noise I make.

I was a fantasista with the ability to be Japan's representative, so if it's to look for space, this measly crowd was child's play. Ha! If it's going against what people would expect, I was totally good at that! After all, I was always going against the trends of the world that left me behind!

I handled the waves of people as if I was training with a wooden doll and when I made it out to an area sparse of people, I realized that Yuigahama might've not been able to do the same things as I could.

Crap, I used my skill too much there. I thought and turned around, but my concern wasn't necessary.

[59] One of Yamcha's technique from Dragonball

Yuigahama made way through the crowd while expressing her apologies like, “I’m sorry”, “Sorry”, “Excuse mee”.

Ohh, her restlessness skill is pretty amazing…

“What’s wrong?”

When she managed to make it through and up to me, she tilted her head with a confused look.

“Nothing…”

On second thought, people used to these things were better at dealing with them. This place wasn’t an unchallenged sphere for Stealth Hikki.

“So it looks like we managed to find a spot with little people.”

“Isn’t this a pay area…?”

When she said that, I looked around and sure enough, there were taut yellow ropes that clearly partitioned the area off.

The entirety of this plaza was confined by trees, so if you sat at a normal spot, it might be a little difficult to see the fireworks. But this pay area was on a small hill, so the view was spectacular.

The security seemed flawless as there were part-timers patrolling the area.

The typical scenario would be us being chased away for stopping so close to the pay area.

“Guess we should look somewhere else…”

The path along the rope seemed less crowded, so I nodded to Yuigahama and started walking.

“Huuuh? It’s Hikigaya-kun.”

An air of elegance hung in the air of the area that was conspicuously dark blue in the darkness and there, a refreshing yukata sporting a design with lilies and autumn foliage.

The one there was Yukinoshita Haruuno.

She was there in the area literally drawn by the rope.

Served by the people around her, the seat she was situated in was like that of a throne as if occupied by an empress.

× × ×

At seven forty, there was an announcement that the scheduled start of the fireworks festival would be delayed by ten minutes.

Applause erupted and easily-elated people whistled through their fingers from somewhere. Had they been any closer, I might've smacked them. Typically fifty percent of guys who'd whistle so arrogantly like that often had the image that they're usually docile, but only became noisy at times like these.

In this plaza, this pay area was situated on a small hill that directly faced the area where the fireworks would be shot off, allowing you to see them their entirety without the obstruction of the surrounding trees.

You could only enter this area if you purchased a ticket, but Haruno-san's guidance allowed us entry.

"I'm here as a proxy for my father and I was getting bored with all the reception I had to do. I'm so glad you showed up, Hikigaya-kun."

"Right. Proxy, huh? That's amazing." I made restless looks around while mostly ignoring what she said in the latter half.

Haruno smiled. "Ufufu, I guess you could call these VIP seats. You wouldn't be able to get in normally."

Haruno-san showed off with the innocence of a child. There were times where openly bragging didn't give make you look like you're being arrogant.

It's that straightforwardness of hers that I thought correlated with her charisma. Just moments earlier, when she told the people gathered around in the surroundings, "I'm sorry, my friends were running late and seem to have arrived", that was enough for them to back down.

On top of that, when she invited us in, the security part-timers unconditionally accepted it and didn't bother to confirm with her. *Actual VIPs are totally something else.*

"Whoa, a celebrity…" said Yuigahama, expressing a sigh that bordered on a strange line between being impressed or dumbfounded.

Haruno-san chuckled. "Yep. You know what my father does, right? He's rather influential when it comes to these kinds of municipal events."

"Does the prefectural assembly really have that much influence over the city like this?"

"Oh, you're so sharp. You really are something, Hikigaya-kun. But if I had to say, this has to do more with corporate than the assembly."

If I remember correctly, it should've been something like the construction industry. If there's overlap with public utilities, of course they'd be influential. In an election long time ago, they emphasized the importance of three themes such as foundation, advertisement, and bags which I guess was all assembled here. By the way, the themes actually meant cash; you could say real money, too. Also, the three things to a wife was "pay", "cooking", and "mom". Are we having a wedding ceremony speech or something?

As the city mayor or whoever addressed every related party with words of appreciation and congratulations, Haruno-san encouraged us to take a seat beside her. Yuigahama and I decided to take her up on her offer with gratitude.

We bowed our heads to her and sat.

I wanted to sit comfortably, but with Haruno-san next to me, I couldn't calm down; it had more to do with how frightening her more-than-perfect front than feeling nervous from sitting next to a beautiful older woman. The way it felt like something darker was swirling inside of her wasn't something I was good with.

Suddenly, Haruno-san whispered close to my ears. "In any case… Having an affair isn't very admirable, you know."

"No, it's not even an affair…" I answered.

When I answered, the warmth of Haruno-san's expression froze over. "So you're serious…? All the more reason why I can't forgive you even more."

"O-O-Ow!"

She pulled at my ears similarly to how Katsuo would be done in by Sazae. I managed to avoid excessive damage by promptly making my escape from her, but if she had pulled any harder, I might've ended up inviting Nakajima to play some baseball.

"I'm not serious, either…"

Gosh darn it, I really don't like pain, okay? How could I possibly be having an affair or be serious? "Motivation! Energy! Iwaki!"[60] wasn't my thing, really. I had no idea what that's trying to tell me, but that ain't happening, Iwaki![61]

After I warded off Haruno-san's attack, the important person or whoever finished his greeting and they were finally going to start with the first round of fireworks.

Accompanied by music, the extra large star mine bloomed into a large flower in the night sky. Numerous layers of red, yellow, and bitter orange expanded incessantly while continuing to light up the darkness.

"Hoh…"

The blossoming halo of light brilliantly reflected against the half-mirror glass of the port tower, intensifying the halo's radiance. With this as the start, it looks like they planned to continue with eight thousand more multi-colored shots of fireworks.

Numerous thunderous sounds roared and roared. It's almost as if I was listening to Tao Pai Pai[62].

As the explosive sounds resounded on, Haruno-san adjusted her seating.

"U-Um!"

As if she had been trying to find the timing to speak up the entire time, Yuigahama spoke to Haruno-san with me in between them. Haruno-san blinked her large eyes at her. "Umm… You're Something-gahama-chan?"

"I-It's Yuigahama."

"Ah, that's right. Sorry, sorry."

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[60] Nobuko Iwaki's phrase. He's a Japanese politician of the Liberal Democratic Party in Japan

[61] Political ad

[62] Dragonball

Haruno-san didn't seem like she meant any harm at all. But that definitely had to be on purpose… She wasn't the kind of person to forget a name after hearing it. After all, her specs were equal to that of Yukinoshita's; rather, it's likely she was beyond her. I couldn't help but think that even this trivial slip of the tongue had some kind of hidden intention.

I stared at Haruno-san to see if I could figure out what that was and she slipped out a chuckle.

A chill ran down my spine. She smiled as if she knew exactly what I was thinking and the fact that it was beautiful made it even scarier.

"Is Yukinon not here with you today?"

"If you're looking for Yukino-chan, I think she might be at home right now. It's usually my job to handle these public appearances. Remember how I said I was my father's proxy? It's not like I'm here to have fun." Haruno-san pointed to herself and smiled in jest. "It's my job as the oldest daughter to attend events like these. It's what our mother decided on a long time ago."

I had the feeling Yukinoshita had said the same thing before, that it was the older sister's job to take part in these events and that she was just a substitute.

So in other words, did that mean Haruno-san was the official successor to her father? Well, it should be natural that the eldest daughter was taking over the family business.

But with just that, there's still something missing.

"Is that, like, something Yukinon can't attend?"

Right, Haruno-san being the successor was fine. However, that didn't hold as a reason as to why Yukinoshita couldn't come.

Haruno-san made a problematic smile. "Mm. Well, it's what my mother decided… Besides, it's easier to understand this way, right?"

"Well you both do look similar, so if only one of you attends, then you won't be mistaken for the other, but…" said Yuigahama, but that probably wasn't what the issue was.
The idea was how they'd be perceived. Demonstrating that there's a single successor meant less bothersome problems. There'd be more negatives to giving the people the idea that they were having a family dispute over succession. They're like a samurai household or something…

Haruno-san placed her finger on her cheek and let out a difficult sigh. "You see, our mother is really forceful and scary."

"Huh? Even more than Yukinoshita?"

"Yukino-chan? Scary?"

After giving me an intent look, she laughed pleasantly, "Ahahaha!" Compared to her cheerfulness all this time, she truly looked like she was laughing.

Haruno-san wiped the tears at her eyes as she breathed out in satisfaction. Apparently mindful of her surroundings, she cleared her throat. "Gosh, you're so rude, Hikigaya-kun. Is that what you think of a girl that cute?"

She giggled for a moment, moved her face closer to mine, and whispered into my ears, "My mother's scarier than me."

"…Is that human?"

Yukinoshita's one thing, but she's scarier than Haruno-san? That's bad, right? We're not talking about the level of a strengthened power suit here, that's totally a gundam.

"My mother's the type of person who decides on everything and forces people to follow her, so we end up having to make compromises… And Yukino-chan's a little poor at that."

Poor's not the right word. It'd be better to emphasize it by saying, "A little and little and little poor."

"That's why it was a big shock to all of us when she said she wanted to live on her own after she entered high school."

"So Yukinon started living alone after getting into high school?"

"Yep, yep. She wasn't the type of child to say selfish things like that, but our father was so happy he rented out an apartment for her."

Ahh, just why were fathers of the world so sweet to their daughters?

"Our mother opposed it to the end and I'm sure she still doesn't acknowledge it even now…"

"She must be on good terms with your father."

"Oh, interested in your father-in-law perhaps?"

"Um, you say Gifu[63], but I honestly can't tell it apart from Shiga and I'm not interested either."

"Mmhmm, twelve points."

Unlike her gentle appearance, her grading was strict.

"I don't think 'on good terms' is the right way to put it. Our mother's really strong-willed, so I think my father just goes along with her."

I wonder if it's something like "good cop, bad cop". Although, I think the "carrot and stick" approach might be easier to understand.

"Of course, Yukino-chan and I understand that, so we're just keeping the peace."

"Talk about unpleasant sisters…"

Haruno-san maintained her smile regardless of my dejected response, but then spoke to Yuigahama. "So, were you two on a date? If so, I'm sorry for distrubing you."

"O-Oh no, it's not like that…"

Haruno-san's gaze didn't miss the chance to carefully observe Yuigahama.

"Ohh… a little suspicious if you're getting that embarrassed. But if it really is a date…"

A teasing tone.

[63] Gifu is a city, but can also mean father-in-law

The surrounding grew dark from being in the shadow of the fireworks. I wasn't able to look at Haruno-san's eyes. However, there's no doubt that the shine in her eyes were darker than the night sky.

"…Yukino-chan wasn't chosen again, huh?"

A mutter.

The fireworks shot up, exploding as if to override Haruno-san's whisper.

The intermitten, but continual thunderous roars and the flickering sky.

The smell of gunpowder that floated along the wind and the imprints of the black screens.

And occasionally, Haruno-san's illuminated smile.

"Um, just now…"

Yuigahama tried to speak up, but the fireworks were shot up at the same time. Haruno-san cheerfully clapped to it. She then turned towards her.

"Hm? What's that?" She asked, as if she had never noticed she was entranced with the fireworks the entire time, and smiled.

"Ah, no, um… nevermind." Yuigahama swallowed her words and the conversation ended there.

The brief sounds of gunshots continued and the lights expanded in the sky. Haruno-san innocently clapped to them.

That kind of gesture was something Yukinoshita didn't do… Well, I wasn't sure if that's because how she appeared outside or that shew did it naturally and intentionally.

Although they resembled each other on their surface, deep down, they were different. But something about the two sisters felt as if they were both looking somewhere in the same direction. I thought that was a little strange.

"Ahh… Yukinoshita-san, you're—" I mulled over how I should call Haruno-san, but for the time being, I used her family name. We weren't close enough that I could call her by her first name.

When I called her, Haruno-san smiled. "Hm? You can call me Haruno. Or onee-chan even. In fact, I highly encourage it."

"Ha, ha, ha…" I instictinctively let out a dry laugh. *You swear I'm going to call you by that.*

"…Yukinoshita-san, you're—"

"Haha, oh you're so stubborn. How cute."

Damn it, this person is seriously hard to deal with…

People who were barely older than you were the scariest. The age disparity with someone like Hiratsuka-sensei was another matter entirely since I could see her as a proper adult, but when it's someone who's only about two to three years older, they just seemed culturally different somehow.

"Yukinoshita-san, you're a graduate from our school, right?"

"Mmhmm, that's right. I'm three years older than you Hikigaya-kun," said Haruno-san with a casual tone.

Yuigahama nodded in interest. "So does that make Yukinon's onee-san twenty?"

"Almost. I'm still nineteen. I have a late birthday—also, you can call me Haruno. That's too long. Or if you'd like, you can call me Harunon♪, too!"

You sound like a clothing hand warmer, Harunon. Yuigahama made a wry smile to that.

"O-Okay, Haruno-san then…"

The fireworks had already transitioned to the next program in the schedule.

The fireworks that were shot up along with the played music formed some kind of heart shape, apparently meaning something.

A classical piece—a piece I didn't know at all and seemed to have topped the recent hit charts—played energetically, sometimes playing quietly and solemnly.

The balls of fireworks looked to be decreasing as if this relaxing period of time was progressing forward and people here and there heading to the bathrooms or to shop stood out.

Voices engaged in pleasantries in the pay area also began to be audible.

On the tables, there was small food prepared as you'd expect of a seat for VIPs.

Yuigahama and Haruno-san were enjoying their conversation while I was stuck in the middle.

"So does that mean you're a university student, Haruno-san?"

"Yep. I go to a nearby national university for sciences and technology."

"Wow… So smart… That's Yukinon's onee-san for you."

"I really wanted to go somewhere better, but my parents told me otherwise, see."

While Yuigahama looked surprise out of admiration, Haruno-san wore a slightly, complicated smile.

Indeed. If you were going to assume a position in a local corporate, going to a local university seems to be the right fit.

But this sure was something. When a conversation involved more than three people, this kinds of topic were usually brought up. As for me, unless it's to stuff myself with food, I don't think I was going to open my mouth like I've been doing earlier. For now, the best plan was to continue eating in silence. Mmm, yakisoba's so yummy. Yep, sauce was definitely the taste for boys[64].

"Oh, but, but, both of you sisters are doing the sciences, huh?"

The remark Yuigahama nonchalantly blurted out caused Haruno-san to slow her movements. In the continuing commotion of bursting fireworks, it bothered me how strangely silent she was beside me.

"…Ahh, so Yukino-chan's aiming to go to a national or public university for the sciences, huh…?"

Her smile, somehow, looked as if it was one of ridicule.

It might've been due to looking at Yukinoshita Haruno with a perceptive view that I felt that. Haruno-san might in reality be fond of Yukinoshita.

Yuigahama's eyes were fixated on her smile.

"She's no different from back then, huh…? Always trying to match with me, always trying to take after me…"

Nostalgic, distant eyes and a gentle tone. But in her words, I could sense some kind of eerie uncertainty.

I wonder if it's a bad habit of mine to instinctively try to see what's underneath things.

But in this brief moment, even if it wasn't me, there should've been something perceivable.

Yuigahama's squeezed fists that were on her knees gently shook. "Um…"

"Mm?"

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[64] Kodoku no Gourmet

While Yuigahama looked like she was brooding over her thoughts, Haruno-san tilted her head in calm fashion.

"…Haruno-san… do you not get along with Yukinon?"

"Oh, what are you saying? Of course not. I love Yukino-chan very much."

Not even a moment to think, she immediately answered. Upon finishing her sentence, she showed a slightly warm smile.

Those words were spoken with a timing so perfect that didn't allow for interruptions along with her gesture.

And that's exactly why it gave the impression she had foresaw the attack with her own.

"How could I not find my little sister cute when she's always chasing after me?"

"Always chasing after her." Did that mean Yukinoshita continued to lose to Haruno-san?

It was a harshness akin to the absolute winner looking down on his foolish challenger and scoffing at him, as if dealing with a child.

With a beautiful face that was so perfect that showed no signs of cruelty, Haruno-san smiled at Yuigahama. "How about you, Yuigahama-chan? Do you like Yukino-chan?"

Yuigahama made a confused look when she was asked directly. But trying her best, she answered, "I-I really like her! She's so cool, so honest, and so reliable. Oh, but she can be so weird and cute sometimes and like, when she gets sleepy, I get this funny feeling. Also, she's kind of hard to understand, but she's really kind… Umm, and, and. Ahh, ahaha. I'm kinda saying some weird stuff, aren't I?"

Yuigahama made an embarassed grin with the fireworks flashing her cheeks.

"Oh… I'm glad to hear that."

For just an instant, Haruno-san showed an expression that could perhaps be called affectionate. But for this person, it seemed oddly out of place.

But—or should I say, expectedly—in the next instant, her eyes changed into the eyes of a yaksha[65].

"That's what everyone says at first. But they all end up doing the same thing. They get jealous of Yukino-chan, hate her, reject her, and then start ostracizing her… I hope that you'll be different from them."

Her smiling expression was so sweet that it was fierce, to the point frightening.

"…I," said Yuigahama, pressured, but continued. "Won't do something like that."

She glared right back, not removing her gaze.

Haruno-san took it head on and shrugged her shoulders and then looked at me. "Hikigaya-kun, you understand what I'm trying to say, right?"

"Yes, more or less."

There's no way I wouldn't understand.

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[65] Yaksha

I've been witness to it more than enough. Yukinoshita wasn't the only one; anyone who was above the others was ostracized by groups. The protruding stake didn't get smashed in. It would get pulled out and tossed aside, only to be left in the rain and wind to rot.

"Right, right. I really like those eyes," said Haruno-san.

I turned towards Haruno-san and our eyes met. Her eyes were cold enough to send chills down my spine. Suddenly, she smiled. "Hehe, you really are something else, Hikigaya-kun. I like how you look at things so curiously and give up."

It didn't feel like she was praising me at all.

There's no second guessing here because anything this person said had something hidden in them.

You shouldn't believe people who'd take a positive part of you, compare it with another, and say they liked it. "I really like your senses~" and "I like that. Your senses, too…" were completely different. Source: my time in middle school. I wouldn't fall for a trick description like that at this point.

"So how about you, Hikigaya-kun? Do you like Yukino-chan?"

"I've been taught by my mom to not discern between my likes and dislikes." I answered and Haruno-san made an amiable laugh.

The time went later into the night with the slow progression of the fireworks festival.

A curtain of gold descended down in the sky.

The conclusion of the fireworks festival was a golden shower of fireworks and was met with a grand round of applause.

"Okay, it looks like the fireworks are over," said Haruno-san, standing up. "I'll be heading home before it gets hectic."

Her eyes asked us what we were going to do. Looking back at her, Yuigahama stood up and turned to me. "We should get going, too."

"Right."

When I imagined how we'd be unable to move surrounded by a crowd of people, the strands of my hair stood on end. The correct choice here would be to follow Haruno-san and promptly make our way home.

And somehow, the three of us together started walking.

We continued through the small path towards the parking lot from the side of the pay area. It looks like we'd be able to avoid crowding by taking this path away from the venue.

When we arrived at the parking lot, a limousine approached us.

Did Haruno-san call her in advance? Or was it a first-class driver who anticipated her actions and moved in advance?

The limousine parked right alongside the sidewalk we walked on.

"I can give you a ride home if you'd like?"

“U-Um…” Yuigahama looked at my face while hesitating to decide.

I was staring at the limousine, not giving an answer. It was familiar and I probably wasn’t mistaken; it was *that* limousine.

“You won’t find any noticeable scratches regardless of how much you look, you know.”

Haruno-san smiled with a giggle.

However, Yuigahama and I didn’t have the slightest hint of a smile. Confused by the silence, Haruno-san held back her laugh. “H-Huh? Yukino-chan didn’t tell you? I wonder if I did something bad to her.”

An apologetic voice. She didn’t seem like she was lying, but the mood was heavy regardless.

“Then… so…”

I overheard Yuigahama’s small whisper.

I could easily tell what she was going to say. So, Yukinoshita knew, after all.

Haruno-san didn’t seem to have expected our reactions and tried to smooth it over, adding, “Ah, but don’t get her wrong. Yukino-chan wasn’t the one at fault.”

I… *knew* that. There wasn’t a single thing Yukinoshita had done wrong to this day. It’s because Yukinoshita was always correct.

“She was just in the car, so she didn’t do a single thing wrong. Is that okay, Hikigaya-kun?” said Haruno-san as if confirming with me.

That’s something I had heard for the first time, but it didn’t change anything. No matter Yukinoshita’s level of involvement, the truth wouldn’t budge.

“I guess so. It’s not like she’s the one that caused the accident. She’s practically unrelated.”

My voice was sounded harsher than I had thought. The night was so hot and humid, yet I could feel my body heat plunging.

There was the sound of clacking from wooden sandals and a single step towards me. As if that footstep pushed me away, I forcibly raised the warmth of my voice. “Besides, it’s already a done deal anyway! My policy is to not dwell on the past and if I did, my life would be completely dark, so really…”

H-Huh? Didn’t my voice get even harsher at the end there!? Past traumas are to be feared.

“Oh okay. Since it’s a done deal, there’s no problem now, right?” Haruno-san looked relieved, rubbing her chest in exaggeration. But thanks to that, the mood lightened up.

“…Okay, we’ll be on our way now,” I said.

“Sure.”

She readily let us go, not bothering to stop us.

When the driver noticed the conversation was over, he came to open the door. Haruno-san thanked him in a small voice and boarded the limousine. “Okay, Hikigaya-kun, I’ll see you around.”

She cheerfully waved at me, but she honestly wasn’t someone I wanted to meet very often.

After the driver closed the door and returned to his driver’s seat, the limousine slowly drove off.

Then, Yuigahama and I began walking in silence. We might’ve wanted just a little more time before we could actually say anything.

× × ×

We had left the venue early, but many others seemed to have the same idea as us, so the station was considerably packed.

Due to the fireworks festival, the train had arrived at the home platform somewhat late. When we boarded the train, it had filled up just barely enough that we couldn’t sit, so Yuigahama and I stood in front of the doors.

The closest station to Yuigahama’s home was just one station away. As for me, my stop was about three stations away. It wasn’t that significant of a distance.

Less than five minutes in, there was an announcement saying we were about to arrive at the next station.

“…Hey.”

Both of us had been quiet the entire time until Yuigahama opened her mouth. I looked at her in response and after taking a moment, she said, “Hikki… Did you hear from Yukinon?”

Her question was the type that already knew the answer, but had to be asked regardless.

“No, I didn’t hear a thing.”

“Oh, okay. U-Um… Ah.”

The train jerked to a sudden stop. The door slid open and the cool night air flowed inside the train.

Yuigahama contemplated as she looked outside and at me. But a bell rang indicating the immediate closing of the door.

There wasn’t any time at all to think or worry about anything. I spat out a short sigh and got off the train. Yuigahama followed me off and asked me with a slightly surprised face, “Are you sure you should be getting off here?”

“It’s kind of awkward ending the conversation there… What’s with that? Did you time that on purpose?”

“O-Of course not! It was just hard to say something!”

It didn’t look like it was intentional judging by her flustered excuse. How sly. You’re so sly, Yuigahama-san.

“…I’ll walk you home.”

“Thanks…” she slipped out a word of gratitude.

It looks like Yuigahama’s home wasn’t considerably far from the station. But since she didn’t seem used to wearing those wooden sandals, our walking pace had slowed down.

We leisurely walked, two people’s worth of footstep sounds cutting through the still city.

The night grew deeper, and though we were walking outside—perhaps due to the wind—the humidity and heat didn’t feel excruciating.

“Did you hear anything from her?” I asked her, continuing from our conversation we had earlier.

Yuigahama weakly shook her head. “…But you know? I think there are some things you just can’t say. And when you miss your chance to, it gets even harder to… I mean, it was like that for me, too…”

Certainly. Regarding the accident, Yuigahama had only confessed to it a year later, but only when it was revealed to me.

“When you try to prepare yourself or think about it more, you just end up pushing it back farther and farther away.”

Yeah, I could slightly relate with that. That happened much more easily when you wanted to say something formally.

And for apologizing or repenting, it’s even more difficult. Not only was it already hard to say, the more time you took, the more trouble you had trying to find the right words. But there were also things you could say in the heat of the moment.

“Besides, maybe Yukinon couldn’t say anything because of stuff with her family. I’m not really sure what’s going on though. Haruno-san is kinda scary, too…”

She wasn’t exactly defending her.

However, it’s certainly true that given Yukinoshita’s enclosed environment, it’d be generally difficult to say anything. The high pedigree of her family, her older sister, and surpassing even that older sister that she had alluded to, her mother.

I felt there had to be something going on.

That’s what I felt, but, well, it wasn’t the business of an outsider to be concerned about the affairs of another person’s family.

“I don’t think we should be getting involved with other people’s domestic problems,” I said.

Yuigahama thought for a moment. “D-Dome, stic… Oh, you mean like DV.”

“Don’t say something you have no clue about. I’ll smack you.”

“So it is DV!?”

Nope, not DV at all. This was just V, the visual kind.

“Well, look. Shouldn’t we just pretend we don’t know anything about the accident or her family?”

That is, we shouldn't be open about it. If Yukinoshita didn't want to touch on those things, then it should stay that way.

It's not like we could understand each other, and if we pretended to, that would just be irritating. There were all kinds of situations where indifference was something to be grateful for.

Just like how slipping in the rain with lots of luggage or being lectured in front of the entire class, you really wanted everyone to not talk to you afterwards.

Everyone should realize already that calling out to people with kindness and friendliness would only serve hurt them, let alone not save them.

There, too, were times where compassion and mercy could act as the finishing blow.

"Should we really stay like this and pretend not to know…?" Yuigahama looked at her feet, seemingly not convinced.

I stood still to stay in line with Yuigahama who had stopped walking.

"I don't think things you don't know are bad. The more you know, the more annoying things can get."

To know was just carrying the burden of risk. There were many things you could be happy about as long you didn't know about them. And the most obvious one of them all was how people were actually feeling.

Everyone lived their lives cheating and deceiving others to some degree.

That's why people were constantly hurt by the truth. Its only purpose was to destroy someone's peace.

A few seconds of silence.

Using only that time to think, Yuigahama gave her own answer. "But… I want to know more… I want us to know about each other more and I want us to get closer. If we're ever troubled, I want to be able to help."

Yuigahama walked ahead as if leading the way.

A step late, I walked after her.

"Hikki. If Yukinon's ever in trouble, help her, okay?"

"……"

I couldn't find the words to answer that request.

A few seconds, double that, or even ten times that, I don't think I could ever come up with the same answer as Yuigahama.

It's because I had no intention of stepping over my boundaries. I hadn't done so to this day and I wouldn't from now on.

"No, I don't think that's going to happen."

Whether it was Yukinoshita being in trouble, her asking for help, or me taking that step over that line of my own accord.

When I stated my remark packed with numerous meanings, Yuigahama looked up at the starry sky. Her wooden sandals clacked and she kicked a rock near her feet. “Even so, you’ll definitely help her, Hikki.”

“There’s no way you’d know that.”

Before I could question how she could be so sure of that, Yuigahama turned around to me.

“I mean, you helped me, didn’t you?”

“I said it before. That was just a coincidence. I wasn’t doing knowing that it’d be helping you. That’s why, I didn’t help you at all.”

That’s why. That gratitude, that trust, or whatever beyond those.

They were all just illusional misunderstandings.

An assessment of something that anyone other than me could do wasn’t something to affirm myself. Evaluating someone’s actions and someone’s personality were entirely different things. Just like how a good person wasn’t judged as such on a single good deed alone, basing my personality on a single act was a problem to me. Therefore, Yuigahama’s sentimental trust was wrong.

“Don’t expect things like that from me.”

Because you’d definitely be disappointed. That’s why you shouldn’t expect things from me from the very start.

Yuigahama and I continued walking with a fixed distance between us. The sounds of our footsteps tapping the earth echoed alternatively in the night city.

The mismatched dissonance continued, that miniscule distance of a step never getting smaller.

And suddenly, it shortened.

Yuigahama abruptly stopped in her tracks and I fell forward, our bodies inevitably getting closer.

She turned around to me and was illuminated by the gentle light of the moon.

“Even if the accident didn’t happen, Hikki would still help me. And like, I think we’d still go see the fireworks together like this.”

“No… it wouldn’t… In the first place, I have no reason to help you.”

There’s no meaning to a supposition that didn’t happen.

There’s no “if” in life.

Life was only “then”.

Yet, Yuigahama gently shook her head. At the corners of her moist eyes, I could see the reflection of the street lights.

“No, that’s not true. You said it yourself, Hikki. That even if the accident didn’t happen, you’d still be alone… And you know what I’m like. I’d start worrying about something some day and then I’d get taken to the Service Club and that’s when I’d meet you, Hikki.”

That pipe dream that could potentially happen was so oddly entertwined with reality that I couldn't just plain reject it or argue against it. If Yukinoshita, Yuigahama, and I had all met each other in another way, would we have been able to develop another kind of relationship?

As I was thinking, Yuigahama continued, her voice filled with passion. "After that, Hikki would come up with a worthless and dumb solution again. Then you'd help me for sure. And then—"

An interrupting sound.

It could've been from me or perhaps from her. The sound of swallowing or maybe even the intensifying of palpitations.

For a moment of time, a vacuum of words.

Curious about her interrupted voice, I looked up and my eyes met with Yuigahama's.

"And then, I'm sure I'd…"

Bzzzz.

I could hear the sound of rumbling. Her cellphone was vibrating.

"Ah…" Yuigahama glanced at her purse in her hand. But she ignored it and tried to continue. "I'm sure I'd…"

"Are you sure you shouldn't pick up?" I said, stopping her from continuing.

Yuigahama casted her eyes downwards to her purse near her hands and squeezed it. But she only did that for a moment before she took out her phone and let out an embarrassed laugh as she raised her face.

"…It's from my mom."

She told me to wait for a moment, took a few steps away, and answered her phone.

"Uh huh. Uh huh. I'm almost home already. Uh huh. Okay. Huh? That's fine! I don't need that! I'll be right home, jeez!"

Yuigahama talked on the phone on and on about something and then one-sidedly hung up. After glaring at her phone for a little, she placed it back in her purse.

"My house is right over there, so I'm fine here. Thanks for walking me back… S-See you later!"

"That so…"

"Uh huh, bye. Good night."

She waved her hands with a "bye bye" and I answered back with the raise of my hand.

"Yeah, later."

Yuigahama briskly trotted into her home without hearing my response all the way to the end. I was a little concerned that she'd trip, but once she disappeared into her apartment, I walked off.

I went through the shopping district on my way home and as if the fervor from the festival hadn't died off yet, groups of young men and women in a drunken stupor were frolicking around.

I avoided them and walked on the end of the street, indifferently moving ahead. For every silent step I took, the commotion and congestion grew farther.

When there were less pedestrian traffic and tall buildings in the surroundings, speeding cars came and went. The headlights of the cars that started accelerating in the oncoming lane were so bright that I looked away and stopped.

However, that had been only for a moment.

My averted eyes needed to be looking forward eventually.

Then, what about Hikigaya Hachiman?

Only the calendar was about to end its summer.

It was the final day of summer vacation and school would begin tomorrow. The cicadas cried out hocky, hocky, hocky, but with the lingering hot weather, it was going to take a little longer until the onset of fall.

The last sun of August settled. As the afterglow of the sinking sun pouring down on me, I was preparing for school that would start tomorrow.

I placed my summer assignment which I had finished a long time ago into my bag.

Komachi's research material was bundled with my assignment. It looks like it got mixed with mine when she printed them out as hard copies to hand in.

I skimmed through the report on the subject of flame reactions.

Flame reactions were the cause of fireworks having color.

By throwing metals or salts into a fire, the fire would impart a color unique to those chemical elements. Bluish-white flames would change how they appeared depending on the chemical element they were exposed to.

Coincidentally, people were similar.

When a person interacted with someone else, there would be some kind of reaction.

The colors of those reactions would all vary. If a person changed from coming in contact with a single individual, that reaction would change as well. And a completely different color would be derived akin to the multicolored fireworks.

For example, Kawasaki Saki said that it's difficult to approach her.

The two who were similar in not approaching those around them couldn't see eye-to-eye, so by both of them staying out of each other's way, might actually be the most ideal form of communication for them.

Or, Kawasaki Taishi, who after seeing her, evaluated her as beautiful, yet frightening.

On the surface, there wasn't a more accurate description. An outsider's perspective of her from afar was exactly like seeing her as someone who reigned over the precipice of a frozen sea.

Also, Zaimokuza Yoshiteru, after facing her, judged that her excess honesty was why she didn't hesitate from hurting someone.

That could very well be on the mark if you focused on only that part of her alone. Nevertheless, I felt that the problem wasn't that she'd hesitate or not hesitate, but perhaps, she just didn't know any other way.

Then, Totsuka Saika praised her as earnest and diligent after making her acquaintance.

She certainly was that kind of person. She was devoted to her rules and principles which occasionally would go too far. Of course, that's just something that conformed with her own justice inside.

On the other hand, Hikigaya Komachi interacted with her and felt she was lonely somehow.

She had lived her life all this time with a hint of loneliness from living alone as well as being on the side that left and was left behind. Of course, that was nothing more than the sentiments of an observer. No one knew what the person in question felt—perhaps, not even the actual person herself.

Conversely, Hiratsuka Shizuka who had watched over her believed that she was kind and sometimes all too correct.

She stated that it had to be hard for her to live in this world because it wasn't kind or correct. But that's certainly true, it's possible that nearly all of her environments that encapsulated her was a burden to her. Perhaps, her only saving grace was the existence of a "friend". Although those tens, no, several thousands of existences called "friends" had only served to torment her.

Be that as it may, Yukinoshita Haruno who had lived with her to this day had an apathetic smile.

She stated with a cruel smile just how pitiful and adorable her little sister was for always continuing to chase after her and be defeated, for not being chosen. I don't know what it was that she wasn't chosen for. By a friend, her family, her parents, or perhaps fate? Whatever the case, the only one who could ever fancy the thought of her being pitiful was the strongest, Yukinoshita Haruno. Not once did the thought ever cross my mind.

But, Yuigahama Yui who had stayed with her thus far screamed that she liked her.

Her words had not the slightest hint of embellishment, although clumsy and weeping of honesty, her confession was so beautiful that I knew nothing else like it. However, Yuigahama perceived a wall from her. But even so, she wanted to become much closer to her that she'd go as far to borrow the help from the likes of me.

Then, what about Hikigaya Hachiman?

Did I come all this way without seeing anything?

There were certainly times where I could understand her actions and her mentality behind them. But that wasn't equivalent to understanding her feelings.

It's just that because our circumstances and positions were so similar that I was able to correlate something between the two of us, but it was nothing more than a coincidental convergence.

People always looked only at the things they wanted to see.

I think what I did was pick out something that I was similar to her in.

Adhering to isolation, sticking with one's own justice, and giving up on things that couldn't be comprehended; those perfect, superhuman traits were something I attempted to master, things that she certainly possessed.

I… won't think that I want to know her more.

The Yukinoshita Yukino that I've watched all this time.

Always beautiful, always sincere, uttering not a lie and even spitting out more than she needed to, she's able to continue standing on her own two feet without the need for support.

That appearance, the way she'd stand so beautifully like a freezing blue flame, yet look so sadly fleeting.

That Yukinoshita Yukino.

I'm sure I had admired her.

For just a little, Yukinoshita Yukino stops in place.

The thirty first of August and the first of September.

It was a continuous transition to the next day and at the same time, there wasn't a clear moment when the day had turned into the other.

The boundary between the ordinary and the extraordinary.

When the weekdays and weekends collide, the story of Hikigaya Hachiman wants to come to an end.[66]

Things like the end of vacation were so packed with bad energy[67] that the world was well on its way towards the worst future.

With that being said, school would begin again starting today.

The street which I rode on with my bike for a while was as congested as it was two months ago and the closer I approached school, the noisier it became. Now that summer vacation was over, there's probably a lot to talk about. Everyone leisurely walked to school accompanied by others.

Just by attending this high school for over a year now, I knew some faces. Well, I really only knew their faces, that's all.

When I saw Tobe or came across Ebina-san, we didn't greet each other nor did we talk to each other.

Whether it was a summer dream or not, the only time we had actually talked was during the special occasion, the summer camp. Ways to associate in school and outside of school to keep your distance existed.

Of course, I was well aware of those things.

That's why, I stayed quiet like I always would whenever I came across anyone including Kawasaki.

If I had to act like those transparent guys and think it's normal to tap the shoulders of people I wasn't even on friendly terms with and ask, "Did you get a tan?" when I never knew what their skin color was in the first place, it's probably more sincere to just not meet their gaze.

There were numerous others commuting to school quietly at the front entrance, though I wasn't sure if they had the same thoughts as I did.

But as soon as they met with someone they knew, their faces lit up and became gleeful.

I think the biggest reason why people felt so happy from being talked to was because it fulfilled their desire to be acknowledged.

Being recognized as a person, being allowed to exist, and possessing the value of being talked to; they'd use these things to validate themselves and gloat with glee.

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[66] Parody of To Aru Index's key phrase

[67] Smile Pretty Cure!

That's why conversely, in the case where I approved of myself, I didn't have to waste my time bothering with those things.

You could say that by being a loner and being isolated, you were establishing your true self.

I love myself for thinking of these things. I, boku-chan-sama[68], am the best!

I fulfilled my own desire of acknowledgement by myself and tried self-producing my love. Getting an excessive amount could also lead to autotoxemia. Wasn't I just the side giving out love at this point…? I see, so I was a god, after all.

As I thought about those worthless thoughts (they called it philosophy in the real world), I walked down the hallway.

The school building in which I already spent half of my high school life.

A sight I became used to seeing and a sight that I'd eventually forget.

But in that stained view, I discovered the standing figure of someone I surely wouldn't forget.

In the space where the heat ascended with the rays of the sun pouring down on the glass stairs, there was an awe-inspiring atmosphere being emitted where no one from the surroundings could approach.

It was Yukinoshita Yukino.

When I took a step on the stairs, she noticed my presence and turned around. "Oh, it's been a long time."

"Yeah. Long time no see."

I was already used to hearing words being told to me from above.

Yukinoshita climbed the stairs with the same pace as as if she was adjusting hers to mine. So our distance was maintained at two steps without changing.

"Hikigaya-kun."

Beyond the back that didn't turn around, her voice called to me to which I answered with just the movement of my head.

After taking a few seconds to realize that my silence was my response, Yukinoshita continued. "…I heard you met nee-san."

Even with the hustling of students to and fro, Yukinoshita's voice still distinctly reached me.

"Yeah, by chance."

What did my voice sound like? Did it reach her alright?

Before I could confirm that, the stairs came to an end and we exited into the hallway of the second year classes.

Turning left would lead to class J which Yukinoshita belonged to and turning right would lead to classes H to A.

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[68] The Kunagisa from Zaregoto refer to themselves with "boku-chan-sama" which really just means I with a bunch of honorifics

At the splitting point where our distances shrunk, Yukinoshita stopped.

“Um…”

“—Is club starting up today?”

I overtook Yukinoshita and turned half of my body around.

She looked bewildered, unusual of her to stumble over her words. “Y-Yes… That’s the plan…”

“Roger that. I’ll see you later then.”

I walked off before I finished.

I could feel Yukinoshita’s stare on my back. I realized that she had swallowed her breath after she was about to say something, but even so, I still couldn’t stop.

In every class I passed by, it was full of joyful reunions.

Class-F was no exception and no one noticed my entry into the class.

I was relieved. That’s good, I’m the same like always.

I like myself.

Not once did I ever think I hated myself.

My high basic specs, my decent face, and my pessimistic, but realistic thinking; I don’t hate them at all.

But for the first time, I was on the verge of hating myself.

I arbitrarily placed expectations, I arbitrarily forced my ideals, I arbitrarily acted as if I understood, and I arbitrarily became disappointed. Over and over again, I’d warn myself, yet I just wouldn’t learn.

——Even Yukinoshita Yukino tells lies.

For not being able to allow that even though it should’ve been obvious, I hate myself.

Volume 5, Afterword

Hello, this is Wataru Watari.

We're finally into the peak of summer. By shutting myself in at home and lazily watching anime and reading manga in my air-conditioned room, it turned out to be a very optimal season.

That really isn't it. You've got it wrong. I'm really just a crazy health nut, so that's why I'm triyng to avoid being in direct contact with the sun so I don't increase the chance of getting skin cancer by not going out. Trust me, it's not me because I didn't have any plans to go out or anything.

No, but really, be careful. They call it summer vacation after all, if you don't rest at home, you might be treading a dangerous line of legality.

And speaking of dangerous, summer's full of danger. Including the sea, there's the mountains (yama), rivers, (kawa), and the rich (yutaka)… That' just the Enka singer, isn't it?

There's plenty of other dangers too. The pool, the arcade, the shopping malls, the shopping district, the commuter trains, and companies. There's also companies, and companies. And maybe companies. While we're at it, companies.

I just end up seeing them when I ride the train on my commute, you know? There would be groups of youths heading straight to Tokyo's Destinyland. And when I head home while squeezing the train straps and dozing off, I'd see couples wearing mouse ears…

It's when I see those things that I start to think. Just what was my life as a student about? Just why was I working? For what reason was I working? Is there a reason why I was working? Basically, I think about a lot of stuff.

These days, the amount of sleep I get averages to about three hours a day. Now that volume five done, it looks like I'll finally be freed from that lifestyle… I'm totally done living like this…

Goodbye, lifestyle of three hours a day of sleep!

Hello, lifestyle of one and a half hours a day of sleep!

…What's up with that?

Yes, well, um, that's actually just a scream of happiness from me for all the people waiting excitedly for my work… How should I say this? Um, I want to sleep just a little more, so if anyone feels like it, please take me. "I'll take you then!" people should send a letter to the editing department of Shogakukan GaGaGa Bunko. I'll be waiting.

I'm sure a lot of you are thinking it must be hard or are worried, but since I love writing, I'm doing well. This is like, "I-It's not like I like working or anything, okay! I really don't like it, okay!" or something. I-I'm doing fine, really…

I've still got a long way to go, but I'll try my best!

In any case, I believe it's been announced on this book's sash, but good gracious, this "Yahari Ore no Seishun Love Come ha Machigatteiru" is getting an anime! Yay!

Once upon a time, I'd say things like, "Why did it get first place when it can't even sell enough to get out of last place?" or "How did it get first place when it doesn't even sell, actually, what the heck is first place?" or "The conceptual weapon which can destroy the concept called first place is the Logical Meltdowner (Wataru Watari)", but now it's becoming an anime…

With so much support from so many people, I was able to make it this far. The reason I was able to make it to this magical world that I wouldn't have been able to make on my own strength is thanks to everyone. It's because I had everyone's support. Thank you very much.

Using my appreciation and joy as my motivation, let's keep going forward going, "GaGaGa!"

In this volume, we were given a small glimpse of various things. For only a little, his heart had moved. For only a little, his world had moved forward and then back. He'd stagger around and even though these things are things that happen just about anywhere, this is his one and only story. Now then, how will his story unfold in volume six, I wonder?

As for next time, I'll make sure to carry everyone's power on my back! I'll take advantage of everyone's efforts as much as I can that even Shinran would cry in the grass meadows!

The following is the patronage corner every book.

To God Ponkan8. You did so much work on things beside the original story like special editions and other things! I'm very thank for all of that. Finally, we got a cover of Totsuka! Hurray! Thank you very much!

To editor Hoshino-sama. U-Um… I-I'm truly s-sorry… No really, you've got it wrong, this is… Ah, but if I say anymore, it'll just sound like an excuse… A-Anyway, thank you very much!

To Watari Wataru-sama. Thank you very much for the wonderful comment that I thought wouldn't get written on the sash of the book that was suddenly suggested to the people in charge of editing! What the heck is this!?

To the authors. I thank you very much for giving me an alibi over drinking sake with you and talking about things just to my editor when the deadline galaxy was at its brink.. I'll be counting on you next time as well.

And to all my readers. I thank you all for your continued support. Every time I read a heartwarming comment, my sleepiness, the pain on my lower back, and my fatigue just flies away. It's like a drug. There are still numerous things to happen in this story, but I'll be happy if I can have your unchanging support and patronage. Thank you very much. I'll be in your care from now on as well.

Now then, or with that kind of feeling, this is where I will stop.

On a certain day in June and at a certain place in Chiba, as I scold myself for having thoughts sweeter than MAX COFFEE

Watari Wataru